

New Beginnings

First-St. Andrew's United Church

A report of the fall retreat held on October 27, 2021

On Wednesday, October 27th an all-day retreat was held at the Best Western Plus Lamplighter Inn. There were a little over 40 participants which included members of Council and the Board of Trustees, staff and volunteer members of FSA committees.

The purpose of the retreat, as stated in its objectives, was as follows: To build a strong collaborative approach within the Leadership Council, staff and key stakeholders by:

- Creating fellowship and building relationships
- Celebrating accomplishments
- Identifying principles of collaborative leadership and how they would apply to FSA
- Sharing hopes, dreams and aspirations for the future
- Understanding United Fresh Start and agreeing on key modules

Following up on a virtual Zoom-based activity of Coffee and Conversation in the summer, Heather Locking-Cusolito and Merran Neville lead the FSA Scorecard session. Participants listed as many accomplishments and successes on the part of FSA as they could. The results of this will be put together with the Coffee and Conversation list to create a "master list" of accomplishments – to say the least, the list is long and we have much to celebrate and thankful for.

Another section of the retreat explored the concept of collaborative leadership – what it means and how it could be applied to FSA. It was recognized, for example, that we get used to doing things in a certain way and one liability is we do not always involve the people who should be involved when plans or decisions are being made. Collaborative leadership is all about asking key questions about who should be involved at the outset – in other words – making collaboration a central way of operating in all parts of the church.

George Jolink, who led this session with Kerry Hill summarized it as follows:

The ability to work with others to develop/achieve a common goal in a way that values and invites input from all stakeholders

Characteristics:

- Values diversity, differences
- Respect for all stakeholders
- Having a common goal/purpose
- Listening to all viewpoints
- Delegation
- Know the strengths of each person and use those
- Building consensus

- Humanity, compassion, empathy
- Equal sharing of tasks
- Awareness of others
- Open to change, new ideas
- Transparent
- Circular, not top down
- Inclusionary

Our new Minister, Rev. Dr. Joshua Lawrence, led an afternoon session on hopes, dreams and aspirations. The following is a summary and commentary on the session.

Faith development, spiritual care and support

- Services that engage young people
- More leadership opportunities for youth and young adults
- Open sanctuary
- Extend invitation for Christian Development
- Worship experiments
- Safe space for pain
- Interfaith collaboration
- Collaboration with other United Churches
- Creating opportunities for collaborative leadership
- Pastoral care priority – one pastor can't do everything

Faith Development, Spiritual Care and Support Commentary

A diverse set of initiatives have been grouped under the general heading of faith – expanded here to include faith development, spiritual care and support.

Faith development can take many forms from formal bible study, to participation in Sunday services, lectures, educational forums, church school, personal reading and reflection and many others. Extending an open invitation to people to use the sanctuary for personal reflection is behind the notion of offering an Open Sanctuary.

Engaging young people and young families means offering something different and relevant to their needs and interests, involving them in decision-making and providing them with leadership opportunities.

Faith development also means collaborating with other United Churches and faiths to express and give expression to our shared interests. This can take many forms from music events to lectures and educational forums – and many others.

The people who comprise our community of faith are diverse in their needs and being able to provide comfort and support and providing a space in which people can express their emotions – including pain – is part of being a supportive space in which people can grow in faith. On an individual level this can include pastoral care and as our community of faith ages, these needs can be expected to increase.

The overarching objective of these opportunities for faith development, spiritual care and support – and the challenge for FSA - is to provide a variety of ways in which the diverse needs of different people at different stages of life and situations can grow, learn, receive support and feel cared for.

Music and the Arts

- Full scale oratorio
- Theatrical performance
- Concert series featuring First Nations, LGBTQ artists – other groups

Music and the Arts Commentary

Music is a thread that weaves its way throughout the life experience people have of FSA – be that in church services, jazz nights, Advent and Lenten recitals or special concerts and performances. We host groups that use FSA as both a rehearsal and performance space. We collaborate with others – such as the Salvation Army – to bring music to our community of faith. It is an important way in which people are engaged with and participate with FSA – from the very young to the very old.

Music and the arts are a way of expressing our faith that goes beyond words.

The suggestion of a full-scale oratorio and theatrical performances highlights and reflects the talent we have to bring music and theatre to life. The suggestion of a concert series involving First Nations, LGBTQ artists and others speaks directly to the acknowledgment that “in diversity there is harmony” to borrow from the name given to the outdoor organ pipe sculpture near our atrium. It is recognition that the community and larger environment in which we are located is more diverse than our particular community of faith – and that can give expression to this through music and the arts. It is a way to reach out and engage with the diversity around us.

The overarching objective of music and the arts is to give expression to the talent within our own community of faith and to celebrate the talent and diversity outside of ourselves – all of which enriches our lives personally and collectively.

Service, social action and social justice

- Expanding outreach (refugee sponsorship/Indwell)
- Anti-racism training
- Direct engagement with First Nations
- Take leadership role in addressing climate change
- First Nations speaker (Tracey Whiteye)

Service, Social Action and Social Justice Commentary

Service, social action and social justice – like faith development and music and the arts are one of the three pillars of FSA. It helps to define our relationship with the larger community and work around us. In many ways it is faith in action.

There is a long and robust tradition within the United Church of giving tangible expression to service, social action and social justice. Our commitment to the Mission and Service Fund and many charities – both local, national and international – speaks directly to our commitment in this regard. Major examples include the ordination of same sex clergy and the marriage of same sex couples and more recently designation of churches as affirming – directly recognizing the diversity within our community and our interest in making everyone feel welcome and accepted.

Like many other church denominations, the United Church shares in the cultural genocide perpetrated upon Indigenous peoples in Canada – and the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other findings and reports have brought all this to light. It is a shameful legacy that we own and need to address – and seeking out ways to engage meaningfully with First Nations – to learn, to listen and to understand are critical next steps.

The suggestion to take anti-racism training speaks to gaining a deeper understanding – individually and collectively – of our unspoken or unconscious biases and prejudices against people of colour and people from other backgrounds, cultures and countries. Being able to celebrate diversity and difference can become a meaningful outcome of this kind of undertaking. This agenda provides excellent opportunities for collaboration with others.

The impact of human behaviour individually and collectively on the physical environment – currently called “climate change” is an existential threat to our future as a species on planet earth. Fortunately, this is being recognized and meaningful action is taking place on many fronts – throughout the world. Governments, major institutions and companies all have their role to play in addressing climate change. But we, as a church have a role to play too – the decisions we make to reduce waste and adopt ways to reduce or eliminate harmful emissions – would in turn give us the credibility to advocate on a larger scale – to “walk the talk”. Like anti-racism training, this agenda provides excellent opportunities for collaboration with others.

We are currently engaged in local outreach in a variety of ways – often through providing modest funds to groups and organizations working directly to mitigate the impact of poverty and homelessness within our community. The recent proposal brought forward by Ark Aid Mission Services which would see FSA providing the location for an Out of the Cold program provides FSA with the opportunity – through partnership – to provide direct support to people living with homelessness during the winter. The program would provide overnight sleeping accommodation. Such a program is outside the usual “comfort zone” of FSA members but at the same time it provides the opportunity for us to become directly engaged with very vulnerable members of our community and to offer assistance and support in a very tangible and practical way.

Other opportunities to expand our outreach horizons includes supporting resettlement of refugees, an opportunity which has come to our attention through an Afghani family.

The overriding objective of service, social action and social justice is to use a variety of means and opportunities to live out our faith and commitment to “love one another” and respond with empathy, caring and action.

Enabling success and action

- Steps toward financial stability

Enabling success and action Commentary

None of the actions and initiatives described above could take place without FSA being on a firm financial footing. Ensuring our financial health takes two forms – wise investment decisions being made by the Board of Trustees who have responsibility for funds given to the church for either specific purposes or for general use; and wise use of operating funds which are used for the day-to-day operations, including staff salaries. FSA has faced continuing challenges to manage within budget and it is thanks to funds provided by the Board of Trustees that FSA has been able to “balance” its expenses and revenues.

Opportunities to increase rental income has been actively explored by the FSA Planning Committee with particular focus on repurposing St. Andrew’s Hall – essentially the eastern portion of the church building. While no definitive way forward has yet been found or determined, this continues to be seen as a “best option” from the perspective of being able to balance revenue and expenses into the future.

The overriding objective of ensuring our financial health is not seen as end in itself but as a means to enable FSA to live out its mission of faith, service and the arts.

United Fresh Start

United Fresh Start is a program of the United Church of Canada that is specifically designed for communities of faith going through transitions, especially those involving having a new Minister come on board. To quote,

The program will help create a fresh start for the pastoral relationship and prepare you for effective mission and ministry together. Although the program is ideally suited for new pastoral relationships, several of the modules can be used to equip congregations to be effective in the face of any adaptive challenge.

There are 24 modules all together and each one is designed to as a 4–5-hour workshop led by a trained facilitator. We were fortunate to have Tanya Cameron from the United Church present to introduce everyone to the program. After she concluded her remarks, everyone present had the opportunity to “vote” for their top four modules. The results are as follows:

- Four modules got more votes than others. These are:
 - Leading Planned Change (17)
 - Conflict Awareness (15)
 - Diversity (15)
 - Transition (14)

- The following three modules can be seen as a second tier set of modules:
 - Power, authority and influence (11)
 - Decision-making: style and clarity (10)
 - Entering a new system (10)

Evaluation forms completed by participants indicated that the retreat was well received and was time well spent. There was real interest in learning about next steps as a follow-up to the retreat.

Next Steps

1. Complete the documentation of our accomplishments and celebrate by making it widely available
2. Confirm and reinforce the commitment to implement and apply the principles of Collaborative Leadership across FSA. – learn by doing!
3. Use the suggestions for future action and summary objectives as outlined from the session on Hopes, Dreams and Aspirations to guide decision-making and priority setting.
4. Take the necessary steps to begin the United Fresh Start program.

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This report was prepared by Steve Elson