



Congregational Renewal Final Report

SUBMITTED TO: First United Church Waterloo

DATE: December 18, 2020

PREPARED BY: Betty Pries
betty@credenceandco.com
Cayla Charles
cayla@credenceandco.com

www.credenceandco.com
50 Ottawa St. S., Suite 346
Kitchener, ON N2G 3S7
519-883-8906



FINAL REPORT

Introduction

On October 9, 2019, members of First United Church Waterloo (FUCW) met with Betty Pries of Credence & Co. (Credence) to discuss options for engaging in a re-visioning and renewal process as a congregation. On December 2, 2019, FUCW contracted with Credence to lead FUCW in a congregational renewal process.

- A Reference Group (RG) made up of FUCW members, met regularly from Winter 2019 – Winter 2020 to plan and guide the renewal process. A final meeting of the RG was held on December 10, 2020.
- The congregation met on multiple occasions for both learning and conversation, as follows: February 2, March 1, October 25, and November 15, 2020. In addition, Credence provided FUCW with sermons and/or information on February 2, March 1, March 29, and October 25, 2020. Credence provided letters to the congregation in January, April and September 2020.

Note: Due to the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic, FUCW’s renewal process timeline was paused in April 2020 to allow the congregation to implement new ministry protocols and to adjust to the realities of the pandemic. Adjustments were made the renewal process and delivery resumed in September 2020.

Renewal Journey Overview

Following a letter of introduction, Credence and FUCW began the renewal journey on February 2, 2020 with a worship service and congregational meeting. (For an overview of this introduction and the letter to the congregation, please see Appendix 1 and 2.) This meeting also reviewed a series of characteristics regarding “Thriving Churches in an Age of Anxiety.” (Please see Appendix 3). With a spirit of self-compassion, FUCW was asked to identify the characteristics that reflect the congregation’s strengths and weaknesses.

Stage One: Allowing for God

Stage One of the Renewal Journey is focused on allowing for God. With this in mind, the congregation was presented with a “What We Think We Know” document, prepared by Credence and developed through a series of interviews and surveys, outlining the congregation’s current reality. On March 1, 2020 the congregation spent time in conversation regarding FUCW’s current reality, adding insights to complete the “What We Think We Know” document. (For the final version of this document, please see Appendix 4.)



Stage Two: Listening for God

Stage Two of the Renewal Journey invited the congregation to listen for how God is calling FUCW. To begin this phase of the process, on March 29, 2020, Credence delivered a second sermon at FUCW, inviting the congregation to reflect on what it means to wrestle with God. As a part of this sermon, the congregation was introduced to and invited into a season of prayer and listening, with special attention focused on how God is calling FUCW. The congregation received handouts related to the season of prayer from March 29 – May 3, 2020. (For the series of prayer handouts, please see Appendix 5.) The overarching questions the congregation held in prayer were as follows:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

This phase of the renewal process was impacted by the realities of Covid-19. While the season of prayer continued, the in-person portions of the process were postponed from May to September 2020, at which time changes to the renewal process were made to accommodate the realities and restrictions of the pandemic. During this time, the congregation also learned that their Ministers were leaving their positions at FUCW. As a result, FUCW now employs an Interim Minister. The Interim Minister will be assisting the congregation in following through on the renewal process and in preparing the congregation for the next Minister.

On October 25, 2020, Credence delivered a sermon at FUCW, inviting the congregation to consider how the Covid-19 pandemic has opened a key question for us as a global society: “What kind of world do we want?” FUCW was invited to engage this urgent question and alongside it, to consider a two equally important questions: “If we know what kind of world we want (or what kind of world God wants), what is FUCW’s role in helping to shape that world?” “How do we nurture a relationship with God that helps us to know what it means to shape the world?” Following worship, the congregation engaged in a “Conversations that Matter” exercise, inviting the congregation to engage in meaningful conversations with one another regarding matters of life and faith.

Stage Three: Living for God

Stage Three began with an invitation to the congregation to listen, dream, imagine and pray for the future of FUCW. On November 15, 2020, Credence provided a sermon on what it means to incarnate the presence of God in the world. The congregation met following worship to “harvest” what it had heard in its time of prayer and to prepare for the action steps that will follow this time of harvest. The



congregation responded with energy to this invitation, generating a list of ideas for responding to God's call for FUCW. (For a summary of this list, please see Appendix 6.)

On November 25 and December 10, 2020, the RG met to discuss the ideas generated by the congregation, sorting these ideas into two categories: those that can be done easily, and those that require more work. During this meeting, the RG also recognised the importance of the governance structure at FUCW, noting that an enhanced governance structure will assist the congregation living into its goals. (For an overview of this exercise and the action steps this creates for FUCW, please see Appendix 7.)

Over the course of the renewal process, it became clear that the congregation is motivated by three key themes: (a) nurturing the community at FUCW; (b) invigorating the congregation's spirituality; and (c) energising the congregation's connection with the larger Waterloo community. During the "Thriving Churches in an Age of Anxiety" exercise, the congregation identified "the ability to talk about our faith with one another" as both an area of weakness at FUCW and as an area in which the congregation would like to grow. The "Conversations that Matter" exercise invited congregants to share meaningfully with one another about their experiences of faith. This exercise was especially appreciated – several of those who engaged in this discussion talked about wanting more of this type of conversation.

While congregations are places of faith, it often feels vulnerable to talk about faith with one another. It is even more difficult to talk about faith with those outside the congregation. Over time, an inability to talk about faith can lead to a sense of loneliness and disconnection within the church, and it can limit the ability to reach out into the community. Through this process, several at FUCW described a longing to allow conversations about faith to reinvigorate the FUCW congregation, to support connections between congregants and to motivate the congregation's outreach into the community.

Living into the Congregation's Commitment

During the meeting on December 10, 2020, the RG selected three items for action, with one already in progress. The RG's selections are as follows:

1. Establish and/or Support Small Groups at FUCW
 - a. Develop new small groups in diverse forms including in person or online: Choir; Bible study; Conversations that Matter (with focus questions) about a variety of topics including matters of faith
 - b. Use Conversations that Matter to focus on Scripture, sermons, Spiritual Disciplines...
 - c. Invite small groups to engage in seminars / teaching events
 - d. Some existing groups could be duplicated (not expanded) for reasons of building connection and to manage size

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- e. Some groups can be set up for a short time – this allows people to build cross-group connections and allows people to connect according to unique interests
 - f. Appoint a team to champion small groups at FUCW

2. Strengthen Online Worship (already in progress)

- a. Enhance delivery of worship online (keep it post Covid-19 to allow online worship to be as source of outreach and connection for the congregation)
- b. Acquire new equipment and additional technical support to manage the equipment

3. Invigorate the FUCW Board

- a. Celebrate the hard work the Board has done
- b. Develop a strategy to reinvigorate the Board (e.g., develop a plan for a healthy transition to following the By-law regarding Board Member terms, remove mandatory attendance at the Board for those who are representatives to the wider church [or have only one person from the group attend the Board])

In the coming weeks, the RG will share the outcomes of the renewal process with its Board for approval. Following approval, the outcome and related action steps will be shared with the congregation.

Closing Remarks

It has been a source of great joy for Credence to work with FUCW. The congregation is full of warmth and potential. The desire for a deeper relationship with God is palpable, congregants long for deeper connection with one another, and the congregation is committed to finding ways to support the needs of the community. Together these characteristics form a strong foundation upon which the congregation can build.



Appendix 1: Introduction to the Renewal Process

Background Information

FUCW is a 129-year-old congregation, rebuilt in 1966 to meet the needs of a growing membership, grounded in the centre of an ever-changing Uptown Waterloo. Today (previous to the implementation of Covid-19 restrictions) FUCW has a weekly attendance of 80-100 people. FUCW is interested in exploring who it is called to be today and the direction in which it is being called. The Board has identified several challenges for consideration: communication both with internal members and the external community, an understanding of and the ability to articulate FUCW's "common thread" that reflects the core uniqueness of the congregation and holds all members together, decreasing membership, and how best to serve the local community. FUCW's questions can be summarized in the following core questions: "Who are we?" "Why are we here?" and "What are our core values and commitments?" Uncomfortable with repeating previous processes that have not led to positive or actionable results, FUCW wants to ask questions that root the congregation in its core values, identity, and purpose.

21st Century Dynamics

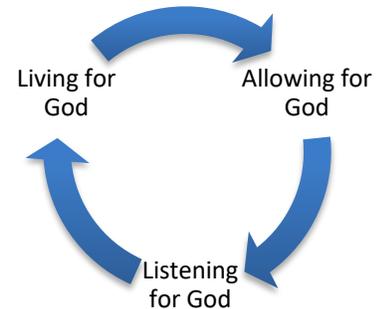
Many churches today are wrestling with small numbers and with an aging demographic. While it is tempting to wonder what has happened internally that has led congregations to this place, and while such an exercise has value, it is also true that the 21st Century has impacted many churches in this way. For a variety of reasons (changing norms, shifting worldviews, rise of technology, etc.), rates of church attendance have declined significantly over the past 30 years. Some churches have responded to this situation by radically reinventing themselves; others have simply tweaked their way of being; some have remained committed to their time-honoured traditions; and still others have shuttered their doors altogether.

While these trends and challenges can be frightening, they also represent a tremendous opportunity for the church. Decline invites churches to re-ground themselves in their faith commitments; it encourages creativity, and it opens doors to listening for how God is leading the church during this time. It also invites congregations to listen anew for the needs in the world at large. The 21st Century has created a renewed and urgent longing for meaning, purpose and belonging in the wider community. The church today is invited to listen for how it is uniquely called to speak into this need.



An Image to Guide the Conversation

Congregations generally move through three distinct stages over the course of their lives. These stages are represented in the diagram below. With this proposal, Credence outlines a plan for accompanying the congregation an intentional walk through these stages, a commitment of about 6 – 9 months.



- **Living for God:** Congregations begin full of vitality, energy and a sense of God’s presence. As the vision and mission become clear, the congregation does many things well.
- **Allowing for God:** There comes a time in the life of most congregations where things do not go as well as people had hoped. Perhaps a trauma has torn the congregation; perhaps the demographics of the region in which the congregation worships has changed; perhaps the congregation has entered a season of decline. During this time, members of the congregation are invited to surrender their attachments to their existing ways of being, in order to awaken to that which God is seeking to do among them.
- **Listening for God:** As the congregation opens itself to God, it practices listening for how God is leading the congregation. This stage invites members of the congregation to be renewed in their faith even as the congregation is renewed.
- **Living for God:** As the congregation practices listening, its people shift into the Living for God stage once more, this time with a sense of their core values, identity, and purpose, together with concrete steps associated with what it means to live into this purpose.



Appendix 2: Introductory Letter to the Congregation

To: First United Church Waterloo
 Date: January 12, 2020
 Re: 2020 Renewal and Revitalization

*What does it mean to be faithful as a people of God in our 21st Century context?
 As First United Church Waterloo, what is our central purpose for being together?
 To what ministries, dreams and other acts of faith is God calling us at this time?*

First United Church Waterloo is initiating a listening and discernment exercise. As part of the first step in this exercise, we'll listen for how God is calling us as a congregation. We want to pay attention to what it means to be a people of faith in this time. We also want to discern what concrete actions we are being called to take in response to God's call.

Please join us for this conversation! The Church Board has appointed a Reference Group to work with Betty Pries and Cayla Charles from Credence & Co. (www.credenceandco.com). Shortly, you will receive an invitation to complete a survey – and several randomly selected people from the congregation will be invited to participate in an interview with Credence. And, of course, there will be opportunity for conversation together as a congregation, led by Credence.

Please, note the following dates in your calendar:

Date & Time	Event	Important Information
STAGE ONE	ALLOWING FOR GOD	
Sunday, February 2, 2020 Time: 12 pm – 1 pm	Congregation Gathering: • Introduction to the exercise and overview of process	Worship from 10:30 – 11:45 am will include an introduction to the program to be continued in Hilliard Hall. A light lunch will be provided
February 3 – 26, 2020	Complete interviews & surveys: • Understand the Church's reality	The survey will be provided in online and paper format. Support will be provided for survey completion if needed.
Sunday, March 1, 2020 Time: TBD	Congregation Gathering: • Engaging the current reality • Review survey & interview results	Meeting location: Hilliard Hall
STAGE TWO		



March – April 2020	LISTENING FOR GOD	
STAGE THREE	LIVING FOR GOD	Commitment 2020

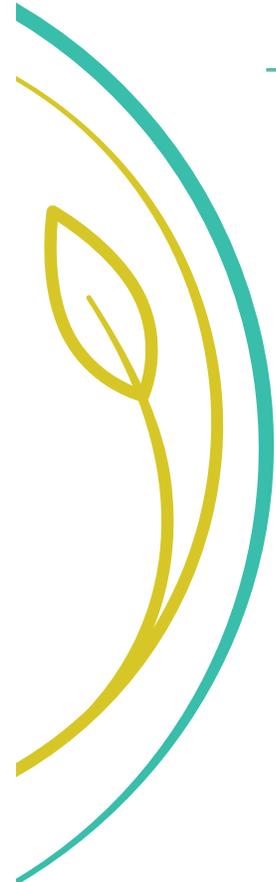
We pray that our dialogue together will open our community to listening deeply for God’s leading and that in so doing we will reflect ever more closely that which God is creating us to be.

The Reference Group

Greg Case, Rev. Kellie McComb, Margaret Leask, Muriel Omand-Naylor, Sarah Snyder, Joan Westcott



Appendix 3: Thriving Churches in an Age of Anxiety



Thriving Churches in an Age of Anxiety

1. A leader people want to follow
2. Dynamic, centering spirituality
3. Loving & authentic relationships
4. We talk about our faith to one another
5. Inspiring worship
6. Fence Posts - something concrete to lean on
7. We market ourselves to ourselves
8. Making sense of the world; serving the world
9. Smaller opportunities to connect to whole
10. Meaningful avenues of participation
11. Effective structures & adequate resources

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Appendix 4: What We Think We Know about FUCW

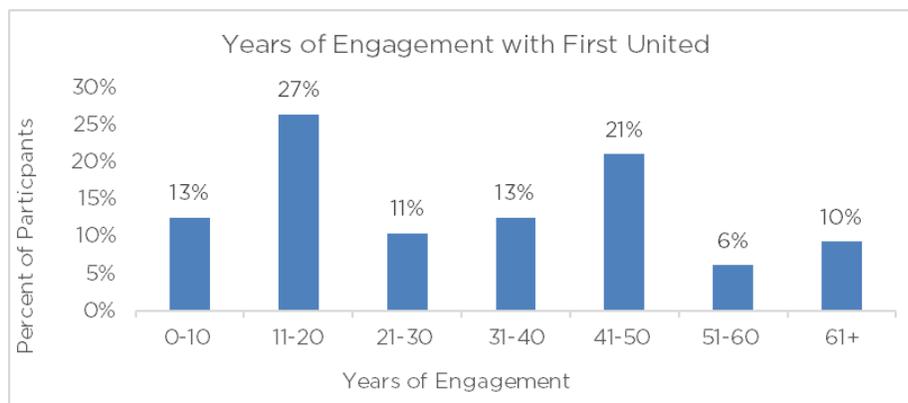
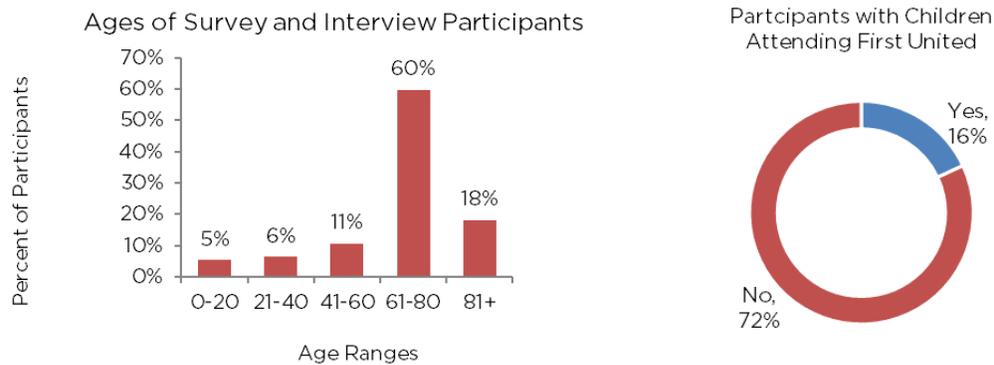
“What We Think We Know”

First United Church (Waterloo)

March 4, 2020

This document is based on 18 randomly selected interviews, a group interview with the Reference Group and the information found in the 76 surveys filled out (online and on paper) by members of the congregation. The document is a collation of the perspectives of the congregation, provided in aggregate fashion to ensure confidentiality. In general, comments heard only once are not included in the document.

The following diagrams are tallies of the survey and interview respondents.





Overview

We are a congregation of people who contribute to the church community – and beyond – in many important ways. We are located in a well-used building in the heart of Uptown Waterloo and enjoy being located in this hub of activity. We are an affirming congregation. Many of us deeply value the community we find at First United. The music here draws many of us in. Some of us are especially drawn to First United for spiritual nourishment and for the congregation’s community service work. We have a heart for the underserved in our community.

We regard ourselves as a welcoming congregation, though this is not felt by everyone in the same way. We do not receive many new visitors on Sunday mornings. Some are very ‘in the know’ about what’s happening, others only find out after an event has passed. Some feel very connected; others less so. There can be a feeling of an “inner and outer ring” at the church.

Demographics, Attendance, & Finances

- The majority of our members are over 60 years old. We have some younger families and youth for which we are grateful.
- We have a small but engaged youth group (who enjoy the Sunday Café) and our Messy Church ministry engages younger people. We have approximately 150 active participants and many of us desire for that number to grow.
- Some of us worry about our finances; others think we are doing well financially.
 - Our financial fears are driven by our shifting demographics.
 - Many of us (though not all) are concerned about the cost of maintaining a visibly aging (and not fully accessible) building and with the supports and programming that we offer.
 - Some have concerns that, though the work of the staff is valuable, we may not be able to afford the staff we have.

Strengths, Assets, Opportunities

- We love the musical gifts that are present and are shared at First United.
- We support the outreach programs that we run in the community and appreciate that this congregation is one that is interested in these types of programs. Our location offers ample opportunity for community connections and outreach.
- Many offer their time, money, and talents to church programs and activities.
- Many of us feel a strong sense of fellowship and community at the church. There are many positive feelings around fellowship with, and support from, others in the congregation.
- Some of us find pastoral care and opportunities for faith development to be a strength at First United.
- Several of us wonder about exploring the idea of amalgamation with another congregation as a way of addressing questions related to sustainability.



- Some of us are deeply interested in engaging in a process of listening to where God is calling us as a congregation and of what God is calling us to let go.

Challenges and Fears

- Size and Change
 - There are fewer people attending our church than many remember from years past. This causes us to worry for our future.
 - We were once the “cathedral” or corporate church for the United Church of Canada in Waterloo. This causes some to look at us negatively. We are not a corporate church anymore. We do not have the power or influence we once had. We wonder sometimes who we are today.
 - It is hard to engage in conversations about vision and change (including letting go of old programs) because we don’t want to have conflict with one another, and we do not want to lose people. We recognize that there are differences in perspective among us. While this can be a good thing, it requires us to open ourselves to alternate voices.
- Community beyond and inside of our walls
 - Some of us feel that we are more connected to the community beyond the walls of the church than the community within the church.
 - Some of us have experienced our personal needs, as congregants, not being met by the church.
 - Some of our ministries (such as Messy Church) can be seen as disconnected from the Sunday morning congregation *or* that the congregation is disconnected from our ministries.
- Spiritual Nourishment
 - While some feel that the church feeds them spiritually, others do not.
 - Some expressed a desire for more pastoral care for elderly members.
- Worship
 - Although many enjoy the sermons, some fear the sermons lack present-day relevance (personal and societal). Some are interested in small group gatherings for worship and spiritual conversation.
- Lay Leadership & Operations
 - Many of us are concerned about the lack of new people in lay leadership roles.
 - Some who are not in leadership roles worry that the leadership space is not open to them.
 - Those currently serving in leadership roles wish to share leadership and worry about burnout and/or fear for the future of the church as they know they cannot serve indefinitely.

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- A few expressed a concern that the Board operates with too much of a centralized decision-making model, leaving out the voices of others in the congregation.

Callings / Dreams

- Many of us feel strongly called to share God's love by continuing to reach out to the community in which we are located.
- Some of us are interested in exploring how our church can meet present-day needs for faith and community, to make sense of the time we are living in, and to leave Sunday morning services feeling inspired.
- We wonder about how to enhance our engagement with children and youth in worship and/or how to strengthen our all-ages worship services. We recognise we need more leaders for our youth. We wonder about how to enhance our programs for youth (possibly in collaboration with other congregations).
- A few of us dream about making changes to the church building to be more environmentally friendly, user friendly and accessible, including the addition of more washrooms. Some of us think about modifying our sanctuary seating (so that it is not fixed) to allow for more flexibility and to allow the building to be a stronger hub for the community.
- With the Universities and a College nearby, we wonder about whether there is a ministry opportunity there for us (games night, food, etc.), recognising that these young adults may only be a part of us for a short time before they move away.
- Some of us long for a kinder and stronger community at First United. We wonder about how the multiple "circles" that make up First United can be brought together. We wonder about how to build trust with one another. We recognise that we would do well to strengthen the lines of communication within First United.
- A number of us long for more opportunities to talk about spirituality and to have conversations that are more vulnerable in nature.
- Many of us long for a common vision for our congregation: Who are we? Why are we here?



Appendix 5: Prayer and Discernment Overview

Multiple Forms of Prayer

1. Spoken Prayer: Bringing our gratitude, joys and concerns to God.
2. Contemplative or Centering Prayer: Practicing returning to God through meditative silence
3. Acceptance Prayers: Prayer phrases, offered through the day, to release thoughts and feelings into God's care.
4. Walking Prayer: Meditative silence while walking and/or praying while walking.
5. Prayerful Reading of Scripture (Lectio Divina): Listening for how a text speaks into our lives.
6. Sung Prayer: Singing hymns as a form of prayer.

Why Prayer?

- The practice of returning to God in prayer trains our souls so we can return to God even when we are not in prayer. This helps us in many ways: During times of stress we can return to God's grounding presence; during daily life we begin to notice God's beauty and wonder; with regard to our congregation, it can allow us to notice the future to which God calls us.
- Great insights and holy moments may come during the practice of prayer. Do not be distracted by these. Instead, return to prayer and silence. After your time of prayer, you may revisit these insights. More likely, great insights will come to you in the rest of your life, in quiet moments, in worship, at the grocery store, while driving, etc. Spending time in prayer readies the heart to receive insights when not in prayer.
- If sitting to practice prayer is not comfortable for you, try walking or reading a Scripture passage in a spirit of contemplation.
- For the next several months, the congregation will be practicing a form of contemplative prayer during worship; the congregation is also asked to practice prayer personally at home – if even 2 minutes per day.

What are we listening for?

- Our purpose is to open our hearts, minds and spirits – to allow God's Spirit to speak to us and through us with regard to how God is calling the congregation. We do not want to assume a direction. Instead, we want to listen for a direction even as we honour our own thoughts re: the church's direction.
- We want to discover how God is calling our congregation at this time and in this place.
- This journey of discovery depends as much on us being personally transformed as it does on the congregation being transformed together.

Contemplative Prayer



The following guide is for those choosing to practice contemplative prayer.

Beginning

- Sit comfortably.
- If you wish, ease into prayer by reading Scripture, singing a hymn or speaking to God
- Decide how long you wish to be in silence.
 - If you are new to this form of prayer, begin with two – five minutes, working your way up gradually to 10, 15 or 20 minutes.
 - Set a timer so you do not need to worry about the time.
- State your intention (to be fully present to God); ask for God’s help.
- Take some time to focus on your breath as this stills both body and mind. Breathe slowly, even briefly holding the empty-breath space when you have fully breathed out.

Silence

- Enter silence
 - Use a short prayer to follow your breath or, when your mind wanders, use a word or very short prayer to return to God. Examples include, “Lord have mercy” or “Trust” or “God, I give this time to you.”
 - Your mind will wander! Be gracious and do not judge yourself! Even those most seasoned in this form of prayer experience the wandering mind. In fact, a wandering mind is a gift – it gives you multiple opportunities to practice returning to God. Think of a wandering mind as a giving your prayer muscles a good work-out.
 - Your mind will bring up all manner of things, from grocery lists to old wounds to great insights. Accept and release all of these. If it is of value, it will still be there for you when you leave your time of silence. The goal is to practice returning to God.

Closing

- Thank God for being with you during this time of silence.
- Breathe deeply and close your time of silence.



Listening, Praying & Discerning – Week 1

Invitation to Silence & Solitude

March 29, 2020

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

Week 1 - Invitation to Silence and Solitude

Now during those days, Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. Luke 6:12

In this time of social distancing and self-isolation, it may seem strange to encourage silence and solitude. After all, we are told to stay in regular contact with one another, whether by email, letter or phone, in order to avoid loneliness. Loneliness is different than solitude. Loneliness is about being disconnected from others – even when we are with them. Solitude is about being intentionally alone with oneself in order to come nearer to both ourselves and to God. When we do this, it is easier to meaningfully connect with others and it is easier to align ourselves with God's will rather than our own.

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. What is your experience of solitude and silence?
2. How do you experience God's transforming presence during the practice of silence and solitude?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the "What we think we know" document, what do you hear God saying?

For a helpful prayer app, please see the following: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-mobile-app>



Listening, Praying & Discerning – Week 2

Prayer of Acceptance

April 5, 2020

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

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- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

Week 2– Prayer of Acceptance

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

A kernel of wisdom from the world of personal transformation is this: "The feelings we resist, we entrench." When we resist our feelings of pain, sorrow or anxiety, we tend to make them stronger. It is when we accept our feelings exactly as they are that they lose their power over us and we can chart a different or more confident way forward. (This is good advice also in this time of COVID-19). Similarly, when we deny our congregation's current reality or regard our current reality with judgement, it can cause us either to long for the "good old days" or to seek someone to blame for our situation. Consider the following saying: "We change because God loves us, not in order to win God's love." Said somewhat differently: "The church will change because we love it, not to win our love." During this week, focus on accepting and loving the congregation – in all of its manifestations – exactly as it is right now.

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. What are you being invited to accept about First United that might be hard for you to do?
2. What shifts within you as you practice accepting First United as it is?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the "What we think we know" document, what do you hear God saying?

For a helpful prayer app, please see the following: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-mobile-app>



Listening, Praying & Discerning – Week 3

Prayer of Release

April 12, 2020

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

Week 3 – Prayer of Release

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Luke 23:46

In this Easter season, we become familiar with Jesus' voice crying out to God. This cry is not the cry of one who has given up. Instead, it is the cry of release into God's hands. What is the difference between giving up and release? In truth, these two stances are similar to one another. Giving up and release both mean surrendering our need to have things go our way. They both mean letting go of our attachment to how we want things to be (or, to how we don't want things to be, but we are attached to these things nonetheless.) BUT... giving up has a sense of coercion about it – someone or something has beaten us down to surrender. Release maintains a sense of choice. It is not that God has beaten Jesus down; nor actually has the Roman state, the disciples or the Pharisees. Jesus, while loving his detractors – even through his pain, reaches for the hands of God wherein he knows he will find welcome, grace and rest. How do we follow Jesus on this path?

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. During this strange COVID-19 time we are in, what would resting in God's arms look like for you?
2. What would it look like for First United to release itself into God's care? What attachments could First United release in order to more fully recognise itself as living in God's caring embrace?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the "What we think we know" document, what do you hear God saying?

For a helpful prayer app, please see the following: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-mobile-app>



Listening, Praying & Discerning – Week 4

Prayer of Wonder

April 19, 2020

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

Week 4 – Prayer of Wonder

They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” Matthew 8:27

It was only a few years ago that I learned that the weeks following Easter are sometimes considered the weeks of *Holy Hilarity* in the Christian calendar. This is where the release associated with Good Friday and the joy of resurrection come together in a type of holy and joyous wonder. It is like breathing out after so much time breathing in. It is like taking in – really taking in – the ongoing wonder of the resurrection after so much time in the gloom of death. (For me, raised in Manitoba, it is like seeing Spring sprouts and *actually* believing that summer is possible after a winter of -35C temps.)

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. What does “breathing out” feel like for you personally at this time? In the post-Easter season, what do holy and joyous wonder feel like for you? (Sometimes, the season is not in sync with our own life circumstances. When that occurs, we allow others to carry the spirit of the season for us, until we are in sync with the season again.)
2. What does it mean for First United to embrace the possibility of holy hilarity, of joy and wonder?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the “What we think we know” document, what do you hear God saying?

For a helpful prayer app, please see the following: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-mobile-app>



Listening, Praying & Discerning – Week 5

Prayer of Trust

April 26, 2020

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

Week 5 – Prayer of Trust

“Be still and know that I am God!” Psalm 46:10

The words of this Psalm are frequently used during prayer as a way of inviting us to remember that God is present, and that God is trustworthy. And while we are not God, it is also true that God lives within each one of us, in the world at large, and in the congregation. As a result, when we pray the words of this Psalm, it is appropriate to visualize God speaking to us from within ourselves, from outside of ourselves, from within the larger world and from within the congregation. Some people sing the well-known hymn associated with these words as a way of entering into prayer. Others pray these words in the following sequence: 1) *Be still and know that I am God.* 2) *Be still and know that I am.* 3) *Be still and know.* 4) *Be still.* 5) *Be.* However you wish to come near to these words this week, allow these words to seep into you and to guide your time of prayer. (For me personally, this feels like good advice especially as our culture wrestles with the COVID-19 pandemic).

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. Repeat or hum the Psalmist's words as a way of entering into prayer.
2. How do you experience the word, *trust*? What does it mean for you personally to trust in God?
3. What does it mean for First United to trust that God is leading First United in discerning its future?
4. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the “What we think we know” document, what do you hear God saying?

For a helpful prayer app, please see the following: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-mobile-app>



Listening, Praying & Discerning – Week 6

Prayer for Wisdom

May 3, 2020

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

Week 6 – Prayer for Wisdom

“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” James 1:5

Wisdom can often feel far away. How do we find the way forward – especially when we are in unknown territory? When the church (or any of us individually) seeks renewal, we typically look for wisdom to guide the way. The problem is that renewal depends on the openness to be transformed and to be changed – something that is very difficult to do until transformation and change are thrust upon us (and even then, it can be difficult.) During this pandemic, we have been forced to change – how we do church, how we celebrate the Easter season, how we relate to one another... For some of us, embracing this change will have been easy. For others, it will have been difficult, for multiple reasons. And for many of us, we will have experienced this change like a series of waves – sometimes easy and sometimes tough. During times of transformation and change, we are invited to lean on God for wisdom, assured that God gives both generously and ungrudgingly.

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. How have you experienced the changes brought on by the pandemic? How have you leaned on God during this time? What wisdom is emerging for you personally during this time of change?
2. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the “What we think we know” document, and as you lean on God, what do you hear God saying – what wisdom is emerging for First United?

For a helpful prayer app, please see the following: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-mobile-app>



Appendix 6: Harvesting the Season of Prayer – Part 1

Harvesting the Season of Prayer
First United Church Waterloo

November 15, 2020

The following questions were posed to small groups of First United congregants and leaders on November 15, 2020. The following document is culmination of the responses that emerged through further group discussion and reflection as the meeting came to a close.

Note: Additional insights and reflections from the Reference Group, gathered from the November 25th meeting, and comments from congregants that were received after the November 25th meeting are also included in this document. Ideas have also been grouped into categories for easier reference.

How do you hear God calling First United today? What does it mean to incarnate God's presence within ourselves, to one another and into the world?

1. One thing First United could add soon: THE COMMUNITY @ FIRST

Strengthen First's identity as a faith community

- Better define our collective spiritual identity / grow in our faith
- Being present to God and seeing God in others at same time
 - Through our search for the next minister
 - Without succumbing to a sense of "Covid-19 paralysis"
- Offer educational seminars and workshops – focused on spirituality, learning about spiritual disciplines, and the interconnectedness of different religions

Listening and connecting to our members

- Invite newer members of the congregation to speak into the needs of the church. Invite ideas from newcomers about how First United could lead as a congregation in uptown Waterloo, and what they might contribute to this development. Learn about barriers to joining church
- Develop new small groups – online: Choir; Bible study; Conversations that Matter
- Send gift basket to all those who do not have internet
- Develop adult mentorship relationships

Families & Children

- Increase connection with families with younger children – better inclusion of children and families in worship (music, reading scripture) – to ensure children are active participants
- Mutual mentoring relationship between children/youth and adults



Communication & Conflict

- Develop better ways of communicating our different or divergent perspectives
- Better navigate difficult conversations without entrenching polarized thinking and ways of behaving

Committees & Staffing

- Build in review of previous initiatives (incl. those by Exploration Team before committing to new initiatives)
- Increase volunteering and sharing of responsibilities
- Increase human resources (more staff)
- Develop a stronger sense of shared ownership over our identity and our activities
- Modify Board structure

2. One thing First United could add soon: OUTREACH

Listening to and connecting to the local community

- Invite new members: How can we find the language to invite people to the congregation in way that the community understands?
- Connect with family, friends and/or neighbours who do not attend church and inquire why that is
- Enhance delivery of church online (keep it post Covid): Acquire new equipment and additional technical support to manage the equipment
- Increase connections with university students (food; partnership with St. Paul's etc.)
- Reach out to Terrace on the Square
- Relate more intentionally to those already using the building (see these groups as partners to our ministry) (e.g., Baileys, MTSpace, etc.) If we rent space to long term tenants, their work must fit in with our mission / vision of our congregation
- Consider initiatives that are not "owned and operated" by First but by its members or in partnership with others

Support the larger community through Covid-19

- Fill hospitality gaps that have emerged as a result of the pandemic
- Rental space for small businesses that have been affected by the pandemic, particularly those who lost their own business locations yet still require a place to gather periodically

Increase local presence

- Develop new outreach programs like Friday's at First
- Rebrand the church – changing how people see us
- Additional music lunch hours with different types of music
- Public sing-songs
- Refocus on unique offerings such as Noon Hour Concert
- Refocus offerings on the unique needs of an uptown community
 - Silver Spoon

- 
- Senior Services
 - Rummage sales
 - Expressing our affirmation - invite local LGBTQ+ communities into the congregation
 - Promote “outdoor living” by added Muskoka chairs on the exterior of the building that are open to community usage
 - Collaborate with other faith communities to accomplish larger goals
 - Begin a community garden
 - Consider advocacy efforts for marginalized groups
 - LGBTQ+
 - Indigenous
 - Black Lives Matter

3. One thing First United could let go of: THE COMMUNITY @ FIRST

Focus on abundance not scarcity

- Celebrate what is going well

Release existing images/perceptions of First

- Need for perfectionism and worry associated with that
- Air of professionalism – this also extends to money
 - How can we collect money to pay someone to do something for us – programs hinge on 1 – 2 people / volunteers
 - Many programs are 1 – 2 volunteers away from not happening
 - Or – are volunteers too aligned with their programs to share them?
- Attachment to healthy church meaning full church / church building
- Can Sunday service be more like Messy Church?

Release attachment to existing scheduling structures, routines and partnership strategies

- Release need to complete certain activities on certain days in certain ways
 - Has contributed to instances of blame and us/them dynamics
 - Related to a request to release the need for control
 - Existing dates and time of Sunday worship
- Let go of preaching from the pulpit and ministerial robes

Release attachment to the church building

- Less focus on building
- Transition to a multi-purpose building
- Use funds, currently marked for building renovations, towards community initiatives
- Amalgamation / partnership with Emmanuel
- Use the sanctuary in different ways / Removal of pews for different type of worship experience
- Consider longer-term and permanent business rentals – can a local business operate out of the building?



Appendix 7: Harvesting the Season of Prayer – Part 2

Harvesting the Season of Prayer – Reference Group Meeting
 First United Church Waterloo

December 10, 2020

Bucket 1: Easier to do	Bucket 2: Hard to do
<p>Small Groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop new small groups in diverse forms incl. in person or online: Choir; Bible study; Conversations that Matter (with focus questions) about a variety of topics including matters of faith • Use Conversations that Matter to focus on Scripture, sermons, Spiritual Disciplines... • Invite small groups to engage in seminars / teaching events • Some existing groups could be duplicated (not expanded) for reasons of building connection and to manage size • Some groups can be set up for a short-time – this allows people to build cross-group connections and allows people to connect according to unique interests • Appoint a group to champion small groups at First United 	<p>Intentional Conversations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin a Conversations that Matter conversation on key topics such as “Why First United?” • Begin a series of intentional conversations / seminars / teaching events on key justice concerns integrated with faith (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Indigenous Rights, LGBTQ+ Inclusion) with a focus on how we live out our commitments. Use both small and large group environments for these conversations. • Begin a program of inviting congregants to have intentional conversations with those who don’t attend church: 3 conversations in 6 weeks regarding faith and church. Debrief with the congregation after. • Focus a series of conversations and spiritual teachings on abundance thinking (abundance in all its diverse meanings)
<p>Online Worship (already in process)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance delivery of worship online (keep it post Covid-19) • Acquire new equipment and additional technical support to manage the equipment 	<p>Online Ministry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop ministry strategies outside of Sunday morning
<p>All-Generational Initiatives</p>	



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase connection with families with younger children encouraging better inclusion of children and families in worship (music, reading scripture) and outside of worship – invite active participation across the age spectrum • Encourage youth connections between one another to remain strong outside of all-generational initiatives • Develop mutual mentoring relationship between children/youth and adults 	
<p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a “Communication & Integration” Committee to ensure effective communication in the congregation (build on the successes of the Friday letter) 	
<p>Intentional Relationships with Building Users</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite Building Users into intentional dialogue to know one another better; to think about how to link First United’s vision with the Building User’s ministry 	<p>Intentional Relationships with Building Users</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create connecting events between Building Users and First United. • Use Conversations that Matter for learning / engaging in dialogue together re: these relationships
<p>Invigorate the First United Board</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrate the hard work the Board has done • Develop a strategy to live into First United’s By-law regarding Board member terms (develop a plan for a healthy transition to this By-law) • Remove mandatory attendance at the Board for those who are representatives to the wider church (or have only one person from the group attend the Board) 	