# First United Church Renewal Summary

Date: May 17, 2017

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# The Process

Congregational renewal is first and foremost a spiritual journey – for each person in the congregation and for the congregation collectively. The key spirit that drives renewal is listening God’s leading: How is God calling your congregation?

The graphic below shows us the congregational life cycle and the renewal journey. It outlines the three phases that First United Church underwent; Surrendering, Listening, and (re)Forming.

# Where We Have Been

After preliminary discussions with L3 Group, a renewal team was formed that consisted of a cross-generational group of First United Church congregants that diligently and tirelessly worked behind the scenes of this process. Involved was Ray Bosveld, Cheryl Muma, Richard Routhier, Justin Chute, Clare Beamish, Sharlene Scott, and Gus Langley.

The congregation of First United Church was introduced to Jason Dykstra of L3 Group on October 30, 2016, where they discussed the congregational lifecycle and renewal journey. This meeting laid the foundation of the process that First United Church was undertaking and the journey that we would be taking.

The renewal team conducted research on the town of St. Thomas and we prepared a survey that was delivered to congregants of First United Church. The survey elicited 86 responses which assisted in forming a conversational document entitled “What We Think We Know” that was presented to the congregation for discussion on November 20, 2017. The congregation engaged in a lively discussion around the items in the document that resonated and what they felt was missing from the document.

The congregation was asked to pray regularly as a corporate body and individually at home to ask for God’s guidance around the following three questions:

Who is God calling us to be as a congregation?

Who is God calling us to be in our community?

Who is God calling us to be in our home life?

A 60-day devotional was created to assist congregants to spend time each day reflecting on these questions through a variety of quotes, scriptures, and meditations. Additionally, the Minster and renewal team reminded the congregation regularly on Sunday mornings to sit and listen for God’s voice within the three questions.

On April 2, 2017 the congregation met for the last time in the process to discuss and share what God was laying on their hearts.

# What we heard

First United Church has a rich history, steeped with events and stories that, if you listen really closely, even the walls will share their stories. All are welcome at First Church with a warm and friendly tone to hear about the love of God. The beautiful sounds of music fill your ears and you can’t help but laugh, listen, and be challenged by the energetic and outgoing Minister. In fact, 60.2% of individuals surveyed indicated that they strongly agree with the statement that First is a welcoming community of Christian Faith. Many congregants cited that they first came to First because of the music, Rev. Roger, and the friendly atmosphere.

Throughout the congregational conversations we heard the desire and need for the church to focus on three specific areas of the church: youth, building community, and outreach.

The departure of Barb left a gap in the youth and children ministries at First United Church. At virtually all meetings with the congregation there was conversation around what it might look like for the youth program to revitalized.

Additionally, the congregational meetings reignited the desire to sit with one another, have conversations and build deeper relationships with one another. Although these conversations were not always easy, congregants were able to express their opinions and needs in a space where others could listen and act. Continuing to work on the communication between church committees and congregants to encourage “conversations that matter” was a theme that emerged from our discussions.

Lastly, the desire to continue to reach out to the community of St. Thomas to enrich and make an impact was a theme that continuously arose. Connecting with surrounding churches, learning what fellow congregants are doing in the community, and strengthening existing programs were just a handful of ideas.

# Where we are going

After much prayer and listening, the renewal team has formed four recommendations to the Board for their consideration.

1. Inventory of gifts and talents – Surveying the congregation to gather a comprehensive list of congregants’ gifts and talents to aid in identifying potential volunteers for various programs and committees. Some members expressed a desire to assist in the church, but have not been invited to participate. Increasing knowledge around congregants’ gifts and talents will assist in reaching out to individuals to invite them to use those gifts in a meaningful way.
2. Review of current mandates and committees – Create a team that will review each committee and group’s mandate to collaborate with groups in ways in which that committee/group could be revitalised. Additionally, this team would identify ways in which the congregation could build further capacity in relationship building amongst members.
3. Communication – Identifying areas within the congregation that communication could be improved. How might members be more informed of the happenings that exist within First United Church and its community? How are members of First United getting their information from the leadership of the church and are there ways in which this process might be improved? How is our communication assisting us in welcoming new individuals? How are we communicating with the youth of the church?
4. Expand Outreach – This process identified many avenues in which First United Church’s outreach activities could be increased. For example, collaborating with other church’s in the St. Thomas area, partnering with community initiatives, and utilizing congregant’s gifts and talents to support the St. Thomas community.

Consistent through this process was the theme surrounding youth. Underlying each of the named recommendations is a desire to focus specifically on engaging with and ministering to the youth of the church and the youth of St. Thomas. Therefore, while implementing these recommendations, it is important to note this emerging theme and build action steps moving toward a robust youth-focussed congregation.

These recommendations can be implemented separately from one another, however, each recommendation is further strengthened by the ones preceding it. The renewal committee believes that by implementing these recommendations, it will further provide clarity around First United Church’s strengths and current challenges and/or gaps that exist. Furthermore, by collecting gifts and talents of the congregation, reviewing our current committee’s and groups, building capacity in the area of communication and expanding our outreach will greatly help the youth of our church, build community and expand our outreach in our community.

Personal note from Jason: It has been such an honour and pleasure to work with the congregation of First United Church during this time. Thank you for the trust you placed in me and for allowing me to come alongside you during this time. I will continue to hold First in my prayers and wish you well on the journey forward.