



Strategic Priorities to Guide the Future of First-St. Andrew's United Church

**Approved by the FSA Leadership
Council**

September 17, 2024

Planning for the Future of FSA

The following recommendations were approved by the FSA Leadership Council on September 17, 2024.

They are designed to be used as strategic priorities to guide and inform our future as a community of faith.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. It is recommended that FSA continue and expand its path to become a more inclusive and welcoming community of faith – to be applied to all aspects of church life. It is further recommended that the Faith Formation Committee, together with our Minister of Worship and Congregational Life, Rev. Dr. Joshua Lawrence, continue to play a leadership role in this area.**
- 2. It is recommended that FSA take deliberate and purposeful steps to explore and enter on-going partnerships with other communities of faith (United and/or other denominations) with a goal of enhancing our collective impact on community life. It is recommended that the Outreach Committee of FSA be asked to take on a leadership role in this area.**
- 3. It is recommended that FSA take immediate action to adopt and use the Vulnerable Congregations Assessment tool on an on-going basis. This should be undertaken by a task group formed under the leadership of the Finance Committee.**
- 4. It is recommended that immediate steps be taken to actively explore and engage in opportunities to redevelop the buildings and property of FSA to ensure long-term sustainability and meet emerging and future needs. This includes continuing to actively engage with Kindred Works. This should be undertaken by a task group jointly sponsored by the Property Committee and the Board of Trustees.**
- 5. It is recommended that immediate steps be taken to actively research and report on church governance models that might be suitable for FSA in its present and projected internal and external environments. The mandate includes consideration of the interface between the policy-making, decision-making, and planning role of Council and the administration of its policies, decisions, and plans, including the role of paid staff in such administration. This should be undertaken by a task group operating under the auspices of Council.**

The full report approved by Council follows this page. It includes a summary of planning for FSA's future over the last eight years, future directions and recommendations.

TO: FSA Leadership Council
FROM: FSA Planning Committee and Executive Committee
RE: **FSA's Recent History of Planning for the Future**
DATE: September 17, 2024

1.0 BACKGROUND

Since at least 2016, FSA, primarily through its Planning Committee, has been thinking and looking at optional futures for our community of faith. This document summarizes historical discussions and planning regarding critical issues and proposed strategies for the sustainability of FSA. It concludes with an immediate and urgent call to action.

2.0 PLANNING INITIATIVES

2.1 Town Hall Meeting – October 5, 2016

A Town hall meeting was held on October 5, 2016, to talk about the future of FSA from a number of different perspectives. The following themes were discussed.

1. The role of musical worship
2. The concept of campus Ministry
3. The future use of FSA property and buildings
4. Improving communications and transparency
5. Enhancing the community profile of FSA Ministry
6. Using more technology

2.2 Congregational Survey – November 2016

In November 2016, the Planning Committee (ad hoc at that time) sponsored a survey of the congregation. This survey was undertaken as a follow-up to the Town Hall session the previous month. The following future challenges were identified through the survey.

1. **To continue to be a warm and welcoming place** for people who are new to the church so they can develop their own history and commitment to FSA as a place of worship and fellowship.
2. **To continue to provide music excellence** that enhances and enriches the worship service, and deepens the spirituality of the worship experience, while at the same time being open to new approaches and experiences. Outside of the formal worship service, music concerts present an opportunity to enhance the visibility and musical reputation of FSA.
3. **To think of the possibilities of engaging and partnering with neighbouring churches** on special occasions and on an ongoing basis. This is something that is broadly applicable across FSA and was broadly supported.
4. **To think creatively about how the current building and property could be used as effectively as possible** to meet the changing and future needs of the congregation and the community it serves.

5. **To continue to improve information sharing within FSA** in order to foster the on-going understanding and engagement of the FSA congregation. Equally important is the challenge to explore and implement ways to improve the visibility of FSA in the community.
6. **To develop and implement creative ways to enhance the visibility of FSA's Ministry** and find ways to attract and engage the community from a spiritual perspective.
7. **To recognize the value and contribution technology can make** while recognizing that it is a tool to serve the spiritual mission of FSA.
8. **To continue to explore ways of building community** through social events and to continue to be creative by using the many talents and gifts that members of FSA have to offer.

2.3 Three Community Forums - 2017 and 2018

The Planning Committee organized hosted a series of three community forums to gain insights into community needs in three following areas:

- Music and the Arts (October 4, 2017);
- Faith Development (April 4, 2018); and,
- Service and Social Action (November 9, 2018).

Summary reports of each of these forums were prepared and made available to the members of FSA at the time.

1. From the Music and the Arts Forum Report:

- *FSA has space that could be used by groups for rehearsal purposes – it might require renovation of space as well as the creation of equipment storage space. This is something that could be undertaken by FSA – but there is also the opportunity to do this in partnership with other places of worship in the downtown area¹. This initiative would need to include a conversation about space costs that would need to be covered.*
- *There are many opportunities to apply arts themes to the spiritual mandate of FSA. At the Round Table the theme of Spirituality and the Arts was mentioned as was sacred dance, arts and healing. It was mentioned that a special arts theme during Holy Week could be initiated.*

¹ Since this time Metropolitan United Church has made a major investment in renovating its sanctuary – completed in the fall of 2022 and has secured itself as the home of London's symphony orchestra – Symphonia. More recently St. Paul's Anglican Church – also in downtown London - has announced plans to create a cultural hub and incubator for innovation centre <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/proposed-plan-brings-new-purpose-for-london-s-oldest-cathedral-creative-incubator-1.7036203>

- *There are opportunities to reach out to marginalized groups and to bring the arts to these populations, where they live. FSA could work in partnership with others to support this happening.*

2. From the Faith Development Forum Report

- *As a community of faith, it is important for each of us to feel a sense of belonging, to feel safe, accepted, understood – in other words - to be part of a community.*
- *As a community of faith, it is important for us to figure out what faith in action looks like; to figure out how our faith can express itself in what we do; how we think about things and how we act toward others. The journey is both an individual and collective one and it is foundational to everything else we do as a congregation.*

3. From the Service and Social Action Report:

- *FSA sees itself as being able to continue to make a contribution to the social issues facing the city – while at the same time considering new ways of engaging with the community.*
- *For example, FSA could deliberately focus attention on partnering with groups or organizations that are building community among vulnerable populations and focus on and contribute to programs and services that are developing coping and life skills.*
- *In addition, FSA is in a position to advocate for policy changes and this is most effectively done in partnership with others.*

Outcome:

From these deliberations the three “pillars” of Faith, Service and the Arts were adopted and have been used on an on-going basis.

2.4 All-Day Retreat October 27, 2021

Part of the report coming from this retreat focusing on the future of FSA reads as follows

1. 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.*

Summary:

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.

2. 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.*

Summary:

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.

3. 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.*

Summary:

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

Today at FSA:

Currently, we are 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.

2.5 Council and Staff Planning Session - 2022

On October 4, 2022, a more limited and focussed staff and Council session was held. **Opportunities** identified at this session were as follows:

1. Focus attention on Service/Outreach

a. *New, under development and in need of focused attention:*

- i. *Ark Aid*
- ii. *Afghan Refugee settlement project*

b. *Sustain Current Outreach Initiatives*

- i. *Los Quinchos*
- ii. *ELUCO*
- iii. *Circles (Bridges out of Poverty)*
- iv. *Canadian Foodgrains Bank*
- v. *Mission and Service Fund contributions*

2. Promote and facilitate intergenerational Involvement

- a. *Leadership development*
- b. *Community connection*
- c. *Career development*
- d. *Storytelling*

3. Promote and facilitate inter-congregational and interfaith collaboration

While time did not allow the workshop participants to go beyond naming these three areas – the discussion clearly indicated that, with some further details, these would be suitable priorities for FSA to take on for a number of reasons including:

- *They reflect ways to address the challenges facing FSA, if not directly then by the results and accomplishments associated with taking action on these three areas;*
- *They reflect a theme of service and social action – which is attractive to many people outside traditional church attendees – especially younger people;*
- *They reflect opportunities to engage with others and to reach out both inside and outside our community of faith;*
- *They demonstrate how the church can be useful and relevant in today’s society.*

2.6 Concurrent Planning – 2022-Present

1. The future use of the grounds and physical space of FSA

At the same time, discussions were taking place about how to use the grounds and physical space of the church differently. This primarily involved a focussed look at St. Andrew’s Hall and opportunities to repurpose this space. Both Western University and Conestoga College students helped us to reimagine new and different ways of using this space – all with two goals in mind – to respond to emerging community social needs and to generate sustained and additional revenue sources. This took place in 2019 and 2020. ²

Options identified and assessed by the one of the Conestoga students included repurposing St. Andrew’s Hall as residential space, childcare centre, health and wellness centre and class A office occupancy. Repurposing the space for residential use was identified as the preferred option. (Aaron Friesen May 31, 2020) and the same recommendation was made by his colleague Jake Wyse. The Western University students identified ways to repurpose existing spaces to accommodate a café and co-working spaces, spaces for yoga, an art gallery, a gym, dance class space, meeting and conference spaces, a community kitchen, a music and meeting venue and day care space. (Joy Tigchelaar and Aaron West January 2020).

In 2021 steps were taken to have an engineering assessment of the St. Andrew’s Hall space undertaken. Unfortunately, the funds required to undertake this work were not available. In addition, steps were taken to look at Farquhar House and assess options for that building – including its use as a commercial office space. It was concluded that given the current configuration of the building that the interior would require extensive renovations and upgrading before it would be leased to more than one client. It is currently fully occupied by Meals on Wheels London.

More recently, (2023-2024) FSA has been working with Kindred Works, an organization sponsored by the United Church of Canada to promote and support the use of church property – in whole or in part - for both affordable and market rate rental units. Their initial assessment is that FSA is an excellent site for the construction of residential housing. Whether this will result in a concrete project and “build” remains to be seen. What we can say is that the time horizon from initiation to construction is at least five years depending on its scope, complexity and approvals required. A development undertaken by Kindred Works would not only include

² It is noteworthy that the Eco-Meditation Garden was designed and built during this time. This has opened up the outdoor space of FSA for on-going community use – especially with the building of benches.

residential space but also community use space³. Meanwhile, a number of other churches of various denominations in London have announced plans to build affordable housing in response to the current housing affordability crisis.

In a related but separate undertaking the Planning Committee has investigated several options to increase rental income at FSA. One of these projects, called “The Wedding Project” has focussed on promoting FSA as a wedding venue. A number of steps have been taken to advance this project including meeting with wedding planners and having arranged a photo shoot of the venue. Most recently, the project was accepted by the Community Engagement Program (CEL) at Western University and this led to a strategic marketing plan being developed by graduate Marketing students. A grant of \$380 was received from the Parr Foundation for a proposed website.

The Challenge of Leadership

There is no doubt that all leadership roles demand skills, time and talent to be successful. Organizing, communications and interpersonal skills are particularly important.

One of the vulnerabilities common to United Churches is volunteer leadership or more specifically the lack of volunteers to come forward to fill vacant positions. This leads to current leaders being unable to “move on”. There are many reasons for this including existing commitments and demands on their time – as well as the demands of leadership. There is a general sense that leadership in the current context is not as easy as it used to be – it is more challenging and more demanding. At the same time, many people are prepared to commit themselves to work on specific, time limited tasks or projects rather than make longer-term commitments.

Several people who have assumed leadership roles at FSA find themselves “stuck” with no one willing to take on their role. This is not healthy for the people involved, nor for FSA as an organization. In response, several standing committees at FSA have moved to a co-chair leadership model to share the responsibility of leadership. However, in the longer term that modified approach to leadership may not be enough nor sustainable. There is a need to examine the current standing committee structures at FSA and determine if there is a better way to “do business” – a way that would allow the organization to be flexible and adapt more readily to changing conditions. FSA currently has a robust standing committee structure – but it lacks flexibility. Is there another model that would serve our needs better – both currently and into the future?

³ A good, local example of the work undertaken by Kindred Works is the redevelopment plans of White Oaks United Church. Their entire property will be redeveloped to include market and affordable townhouse and apartment rental units as well as community space that will accommodate church activities as well as other functions.

3.0 CONCLUSION

1. Our future mission as a Community of Faith

There are a number of ways in which FSA has acted on the program and service suggestions and recommendations coming out of the various reports noted above. The current state would suggest that FSA is finding its way in terms of being more inclusive and welcoming – especially to younger families and children and to an increasingly diverse group of people. This is a very positive and welcome development. FSA is slowly developing a reputation for being both child and family friendly. Plans are underway, primarily through staff and Ministerial leadership – to develop and grow this further.

Music continues to be a significant strength of FSA through its choir, the FSA Strings and more recently children's music. These musical programs enjoy excellent leadership and engagement.⁴

FSA has continued to take on important outreach projects – such as sponsoring an Afghan family; partnering with Ark Aid Street Mission in a variety of ways, and lending financial support to local, national and international programs. In large measure however, this is an area where FSA continues to “do its own thing” rather than partner with other churches or organizations to take on specific initiatives.

2. Our financial Future

Financially, FSA, like many churches, continues to walk on a tightrope by trying to balance revenue and expenditures. It is an on-going struggle to say the least. Thankfully, through both rental income and contributions from the Board of Trustees, the operating deficit has been kept to a minimum. Having said that, without major new source of revenue (see Kindred Works above) – the future is indeed very stressful from this perspective as we are not financially healthy.

In that light, the United Church of Canada has recently developed a Vulnerable Congregations Assessment tool, based on the experience of United Churches that have closed or amalgamated. It lists a number of risk factors or vulnerabilities. If a congregation is experiencing three or more of these, it is at higher risk of closing or amalgamation in the next 3-5 years, if not addressed. This tool not only provides important insights into the risks and realities faced by these churches, but serves as a reference document for identifying the strengths and weaknesses or vulnerabilities of others. This was the focus of a recent webinar hosted by the Antler River Watershed Regional Council. <https://arwrcucc.ca/>

The warning signs are outlined below

Warning Signs (financial)

- An annual deficit for three or more years consecutively
- Annual expenses running 30% higher than revenue

⁴ The use of large parts of FSA by the after-school children's program El Sistema Aeolian as well as the use of FSA by the Pride Chorus brings additional music and community engagement to FSA.

- Cash and long-term investments less than three times the annual deficit
- Property expenses 30% or more of annual expenses
- Staffing costs greater than 60% of the total expenses.
- Trend of declining income and/or increasing deficit

Warning Signs (membership)

- Declining number of donors and volunteers,
- Aging membership
- Building no longer suited for the current ministry

Warning Signs (participation and leadership)

- People wearing too many hats due to lack of volunteers
- Volunteers are being asked to fill more than one position
- Volunteers have held the same position for more than 5 years because there was no one else available
- The Board of Trustees or M&P Committee do not have the required 3 members
- Volunteers are feeling exhausted, overwhelmed or resentful
- Very few people are gathering for worship in person or virtually
- Or, No opportunity for others to get involved

The Vulnerable Congregations Assessment tool forward provides a useful and practical way for FSA to initiate and complete a self-assessment. Having the information gathered from this self-assessment tool to use and reflect upon (and to do this on an on-going basis) would provide the basic information needed to focus and guide financial and related decisions.

Recent planning and actions to reduce costs and increase revenues (special events, rental agreements) can help FSA to avoid reaching the 'vulnerable congregation stage' in the short term. However, it may take bolder actions to ensure that FSA survives to serve the needs of members and the wider community in the longer term. The time is now to decide what those bold moves will be, as it will take time for the benefits of such moves to be realized.

3. The Future of our Physical Space

Given that the current physical space of FSA's current buildings is fully occupied it is not realistic to expect significant additional income to be found without adding new space. This is why the Kindred Works opportunity is so attractive. It offers the opportunity to redefine the use of FSA property for both residential rental accommodation and community use that is environmentally and financially sustainable and a net benefit to FSA. This is why it's so important for FSA to take a serious look at the opportunities to be realized by working with Kindred Works.

Responsibility for our physical property and buildings is shared between the Property Committee (for operating) and the Board of Trustees (for the buildings themselves).

4. The future of FSA Leadership

Having effective volunteer leadership is critical to the long-term future of FSA as an organization. Nurturing and supporting leadership development is vital to the on-going recruitment and retention of leaders. It presents both a challenge and an opportunity for FSA and for those willing to get involved. At the same time, an examination of the current organizational structure of FSA is in order and has the potential to expand the number of congregants willing to assume leadership roles.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 6. It is recommended that FSA continue and expand its path to become a more inclusive and welcoming community of faith – to be applied to all aspects of church life. It is further recommended that the Faith Formation Committee together with our Minister of Worship and Congregational Life, Rev. Dr. Joshua Lawrence continue to play a leadership role in this area.**
- 7. It is recommended that FSA take deliberate and purposeful steps to explore and enter on-going partnerships with other communities of faith (United and/or other denominations) with a goal of enhancing our collective impact on community life. It is recommended that the Outreach Committee of FSA be asked to take on a leadership role in this area.**
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- 10. It is recommended that immediate steps be taken to actively research and report on church governance models that might be suitable for FSA in its present and projected internal and external environments. The mandate includes consideration of the interface between the policy-making, decision-making, and planning role of Council and the administration of its policies, decisions, and plans, including the role of paid staff in such administration. This should be undertaken by a task group operating under the auspices of Council.**

5.0 A Closing Reflection

The recommended actions listed above are not entirely new - but they have taken on a renewed sense of importance and urgency since they were first suggested. The current recommendations are specific and provide focus. They also demand immediate attention. It is hoped that by identifying specific mandates and responsible parties – that commitment and action will follow – it needs to as our future depends on it!