

DRAFT: Lawrence Park Church Strategic Initiatives

Does Toronto Need Lawrence Park Community Church?

Well?

Do we even need to ask this question? After all, we love Lawrence Park Community Church. We enjoy its friendly community. We are ever in search of the meaning of life in an ever more complex and challenging world. We are dedicated to encouraging each other to live for our neighbours near and far, just as Jesus taught us.

LPCC is also a relatively healthy church. The community that we experience on Sundays is real. We enjoy a very impressive music program. We are—for now—financially stable and have assets. Our staff likes to work together. This year, attendance at worship is up, Sunday School numbers are up, and the youth group is stable. Our facilities are gorgeous, accessible, and there is even parking! Worship is relevant and meaningful. Congregational conflict is very low—a church rarity. LPCC is engaged in the neighbourhood and generously supports many community social agencies, especially through special events like the Art Show, volunteerism at events like Out of the Cold, and the second collection.

Altogether, then, if Lawrence Park Community Church closed, Toronto would lose a great neighbourhood church. Toronto would lose a church that aspires to values that are needed to bind our large and diverse city together. Many churches have great values, but at LPCC they are lived with a certain *joie de vivre*.

Values and LPCC

We want our children and young people to be involved and inspired. We are a joyful church because we choose to be. LPCC members look after each other. We have serious discussions about what it means to be moral people. We wrestle with the hard answers that so many of today's problems suggest we can't dance around. We give of time and money generously. Newcomers are embraced. We have classes and meditation groups that explore spirituality. We are even ever so slowly, becoming more diverse.

These values also reflect the fact that we are a liberal church. It sometimes seems like nativist, reactionary, simplistic, fear-based attitudes to all that is going on in the world are on the rise. We refuse to follow that route. We embrace our values in the context of a liberal theology that emphasizes following Jesus over trying to explain what really happened during Holy Week. We wonder about God instead of trying to put him (or her!) in a box where we can command God to do what we want. Following Jesus means more than personal morality; it requires pursuit of social justice, inclusivity, and having a heart for the least and the last.

Our Demographic Trap

And yet, closing our doors—even if it doesn't happen tomorrow—is a real possibility twelve or fifteen or so years down the road. We face serious challenges. We need to get our collective heads around three realities.

First, although membership this past year has grown, the congregation has also grown older—even among its new members. We do as many as ten member funerals each year from a shrinking base of long-time members—over forty in the past four years, at least half of those for active members. Our current membership—at least those over 60 years of age—hail from an era where church-going was just what everyone did, and so in our congregation there is little understanding of or energy for outreach to potential new members. We love each other's company, but that means we're perhaps too comfortable with each other.

Second, we do children's and youth programming because it is the right thing to do. We want our children to know the Christian story and be exposed to real Christian community. There isn't a member in our congregation who would want it any other way. However, given their stage in life, many of our youth will go off to college and never come back. They'll think of themselves as graduated from church—at least for a season—much as they have graduated from University. They will move to BC or Quebec or California. They will look for cheaper homes outside the GTA. They will move in with or marry Presbyterians or Buddhists and perhaps try to accommodate their partners by switching religious communities. We cannot depend on our children growing up and filling the void left by our elderly members as they move to retirement communities, move South, or to nursing homes, or pass away.

Third, we are missing too many people aged 25 to 45. Not nearly enough fill our pews as the rest of us continue to age and move on in any of the ways I mentioned above. Where are they? Well, as with most Canadian churches, the “system” and “style” of doing church rooted in the sixties (at least when it comes to outreach, worship, music, youth programming, and leadership) is getting very ragged around the edges for Gen Xers, Gen Yers, and Millennials. Still, the older way of doing church remains very comfortable for our Boomers (born between 1946 and 1966) and Builders (born before 1946). The truth is, much of worship speaks a language the 25 to 45-age group is suspicious of, doesn't know, can't relate to, and doesn't have time for.

But if we are to survive as a healthy congregation beyond the next twelve or fifteen years, we are going to have to become a destination for just such people.

What does the future hold for us?

The most obvious scenario is that in the future we won't change very much—evolve a bit, perhaps, but that is it.

In a large urban centre such as Toronto it is plausible that LPCC might draw enough people to our style of worship to keep the church very healthy for the near future—for five or even ten years. But doing so—remaining at today's plateau—will be a very tough job. It will

take superb marketing, at a minimum. We are not doing even that now as there is no personnel or budget for it. It will take a commitment by our current members to promote outreach to their friends and neighbours. It will take continual refreshing of Sunday programming, especially for our younger members.

Unless membership gets both younger and grows, future council meetings will increasingly focus on decreased giving to the budget as established generous givers pass away or move away. This past year (2016) we've already seen a significant increase in our deficit after years of whittling it down. We had to take the difference out of a shrinking endowment. Even now, budgetary cuts are sought to keep our heads above water. This will usher in an era of greater and greater constraint in our programming, and less and less resources for outreach. We will have fewer musicians, a smaller choir, less office help, less updating of our web page, more capital projects delayed, less pastoral care, less children's and youth resources. The church will not be kept up as well, it will be dirtier, and capital investments will be put off. These cuts, in turn, will impact our ability to attract and hold new members. We would be unable to address the need for programming that resonates with all ages.

Look around. This is a well-worn path for UCC congregations. It is almost as if we're all stuck on the edge of a whirlpool with everyone else, and one by one, UCC congregations are slowly being drawn into an abyss from which there is no escape.

So, without intervention LPCC will enter a period of long decline, probably punctuated by a few sudden drops in numbers and resources as well. At some point—say twelve or fifteen years from now—we will need to consider amalgamating with a healthier church—if such churches are near and healthy. But that other church is likely to be facing the same struggles we are, and so at best we would be delaying the inevitable. More likely, we will dwindle in size until forced to consider closing the church. In that case, a few remaining elderly members will go to churches where they are not known and pastorally overlooked. LPCC's beautiful, but by then decaying church building will be sold for the value of the property and the proceeds will go to Presbytery.

But we already knew all this. Six years ago, for example, Doug Steiner spoke eloquently about these realities at a congregational meeting. No one challenged his thinking then. But major change (especially after renovating the sanctuary and welcoming new leadership) takes time. So, we still have to finish the discussion Doug led us in, and make positive decisions about direction and potential strategies.

A Caveat

I am not an absolute pessimist. We are seeing a small uptick in new members because our current programming is very good. Perhaps these small gains will someday balloon if we just keep at it. However, this scenario, while not impossible, is still less likely than the one I outlined above. It is dependent on factors largely outside of our control. It is not a pattern often seen in the wider church world. It is a pattern that will be hard to sustain in a time of declining resources. Doing nothing new, not making new investments, not adjusting ministry and worship to new social and cultural realities, will likely if not inevitably be our prescription for decline.

The Alternative (Really Important Stuff Here!)

The other possibility is that we invest in strategic initiatives both consistent with our values and that we believe will allow us to thrive and grow. A significant number of members in our congregation work as accountants, financial planners, brokers, investors, and bankers. They all understand that while investing involves risk, not investing means no possibility of asset growth. The same applies to church growth.

With this in mind, council decided in 2016 to engage in a process to identify strategic initiatives we should invest in. The strategic initiatives council finally identified, with much input from the congregation on Values Sunday, are basically threefold. First, we should enhance what we already do well—Sunday morning worship. Second, we should plant a new worshipping community in our church and as part of our congregation to reach that 25-45 demographic we are not reaching now. And third, we should unleash our members to feel free to initiate other new programs that they identified as being ones that they would personally like to take on.

Much of what follows both describes these three initiatives and explains how they fit in with our values as identified by the congregation. But these initiatives will require expensive investments. So before I describe them, let's consider the financial resources we have to bring to the table.

Under the decline and (eventually) close scenario, when the congregation does finally close, its assets will be handed over to Presbytery. Just for the sake of argument, let's say that the real property value at the time of closing is twenty million dollars. That would go to Presbytery. I believe that the Presbytery would try to be a good steward of these funds. Most likely—as is already happening (more on that later)—a portion of these funds will be used to help fund new growth initiatives, perhaps even new church plants, in Toronto.

Under the decline and (eventually) close scenario, even though the congregation has lots of assets at close, assets that will help grow other congregations, we will have forever missed the opportunity to use those assets to grow our own congregation and ministry.

This is not wise. Toronto is enriched by our congregation, both because of the good we do and because of the moral outlook we promote and nurture, as embodied in our values. We want some of our current members to celebrate our 100th anniversary. So, rather than submit to slow decline, we should use our congregation's resources as a launching pad for growth. How? Well LPCC should take out a mortgage or line of credit on its property for one or two million dollars over ten years (for example) in order to invest in growth and renewal strategies over the next ten years. That mortgage might hang over us for a few years—or even decades. But life is better than death, and we could pay it off by our 100th anniversary, if not much sooner!

What is the worst that could happen if we took out such a mortgage? I suppose it would be that in fifteen or twenty years, if all our efforts towards growth and renewal fail, we would

still finally close. By that time we would have only 18 million, instead of 20 million dollars to hand over to Presbytery. In other words, the worst that can happen if we borrow against our assets to invest in growth and renewal is no worse than if we didn't do anything at all. On the other hand, the best that could happen is reinvigorating our already fantastic congregation so that it remains a vibrant presence on Toronto's religious landscape for many more generations.

I should add that it is very likely that Presbytery would also be willing to invest in our growth and renewal strategy out of a fund that has already been established with assets from the many Toronto UCC churches that have already closed. We would likely have a significant partner. We have already applied for funding that begins at 100,000 dollars per year, on a ten-year declining scale, to support our strategic initiatives.

The Three Initiatives: 1) Sunday Morning Worship & the Arts

So what does investing in the future look like?

We are a congregation that loves music. Our musical leadership and choir are splendid. We also bring unique musicians in several times each year. The youth have become more involved in music this past year through youth choir and Pancake Lunch youth band, and the congregation has responded positively. I often hear from visitors that they admire our music.

At the same time, the sort of music we usually do at LPCC appeals to an ever-narrowing demographic, which does not line up with our growth value. This wasn't always the case. Twenty or thirty years ago, everyone knew what church music was, and LPCC delivered. But times have changed. Young people—even if they grew up going to Sunday School and Youth Groups, don't know much about church music because they hardly ever join us in worship! When they do come into the sanctuary they hardly know what to make of it, other than it sounds, well, ancient. It is as familiar to them as reggae or rap is to most of us—and thus not a selling point for many in the 25 to 45 age range.

We also want to offer more structured opportunities for our own members, of any age, to be involved in music other than the many fine opportunities we have now, such as choirs for all ages, bells, and Pancake Lunch.

We could approach this reality in a variety of ways. One would be to continue as we are, but invest more resources in telling our musical story to the broader community. Toronto is a big city, and even if only a small slice of those in this city who love traditional church music could be convinced to try us out, that's still a large number of people! Hiring an Outreach Coordinator might help us get our story out in a more effective manner. It is not clear, however, that doing so would actually reach a younger demographic.

Still, I believe that if we choose to stay with the worship style we now have (and I mostly do, so long as we continue including variety too! Diversity Value!), we need to do more than just get the word out. We should also broaden our appeal by bringing a larger palette of fine arts into the church, especially on Sunday mornings. The demographic that does get our classical bent will be receptive. What would that look like? Well, here is the webpage for a church (one of

many) that is doing this: <http://www.middlechurch.org/worship-arts/> Notice that the picture on the page shows a liturgical dance group in the aisles. My vision is for a Sunday morning service that:

- 1) Often has a **guest musician** who does high quality music in a non-traditional church genre, such as jazz, folk, world music, rock, alt-rock, and so on; (worship value)
- 2) Regularly uses **liturgical dance** as part of our services—monthly (when there is no guest musician). Such dance is done not only to music, but to the themes of that Sunday’s worship, scripture, or other text. It is inspiring, beautiful, and emotionally rich. Mostly, it mirrors dance themes from contemporary dance. It offers opportunities for our own members to learn, practice, and participate (many troupes are church-based and intergenerational). No other mainline churches in Toronto are doing this at this juncture, even though many (especially evangelical) churches across North America are; (worship value, diversity value)
- 3) **Art Shows**. Makes a concerted effort to bring more two- and three-dimensional art into our worship space, perhaps on a permanent basis, or perhaps for short rotating “shows.” Banners and other art installations should be part of this. Showing our children’s and youth art in a visible location should also be part of this initiative; (thought-provoking and spirituality values)
- 4) **Includes drama**. A church troupe can act out parts of the morning’s themes on a monthly basis—perhaps also in place of a guest musician. These dramas are never more than five minutes long; (So, in total, two guest musicians each month, one liturgical dance, and one drama. Intergenerational, worship values)
- 5) Includes a high-quality **children and/or youth choir**—something on a whole different level than what we do now—that is wise to today’s youth culture. Such a choir would aim to be a destination for their kid’s participation by those who do not regularly go to church now. The choir would sing in church at least monthly other than in the summer and spring break months. It would sing a contemporary style of music; (inter-generational, growth value)
- 6) Is followed by **regular after-church programs** of reading and/or movie groups and clubs. (spirituality, community, moral compass values).
- 7) Has sufficient **resources** to get the word out. (growth value)
- 8) Continues our recent move to having more after-church **“sit down and eat” events**, as they extend the opportunity to make and be community, especially for newer members and seekers. (caring, community, joy values)
- 9) Values-wise, **sermons** should continue to challenge people to dream new dreams, to not shy away from the world as it is, and to provide thought-provoking, spiritual messages in line with our liberal moral compass.

Note that the arts focus allows for greater involvement by youth, especially in music and art. It would also offer opportunity to use congregational instrumentalists from time to time. Many authors have recently written about how contemporary culture has created the expectation of “distraction,” or “novel” experiences in order to hold audience attention (ie, Gazzaley and Rosen’s *The Distracted Mind*. Boston: MIT Press, 2016). We can create novelty within a framework of the traditional, orderly, and aesthetically pleasing.

An arts-focus also gives us occasion to refocus on outreach/marketing, once we have refreshed our liturgical offerings. I would stress, however, that on the whole the morning service would be much the same as now: mostly traditional church music, the same kind of preaching, and the same welcoming atmosphere, the same *joie de vivre* described at the outset.

Besides being more interesting and engaging for at least some youth, I believe that we have not fully taken advantage of the challenge to get the story about how we worship now out to the broader community of Toronto cultural creatives, who are sometimes described as 25% of our population. Again—this is a matter of outreach, and adjusting our church culture so that we take it upon ourselves to invite friends and neighbours.

These changes in programming will require investment of resources as well. A financial table explaining how such a program might be staffed and the costs follows after the next proposal.

The Three Initiatives: 2) A Second Worship Community in Our Congregation

We have many more “older” members in our worshipping community than younger members. It is only natural that our regulars, for the most part, really love our music program the way it is, even if they would favour something like a move in the direction mentioned above. Radically changing our single most successful program, Sunday morning worship, by doing away with music in the classical church repertoire and replacing it with music in a different key will disappoint many members and holds the potential for conflict. Many churches that have changed their worship style have struggled through “worship wars,” that have left congregants confused, upset, and looking for new churches as the “old” is ditched to make way for the “new.” There is no tried and true way to change the basic tenor of the morning service without creating significant dislocation.

So, what if we started a second worshipping community within our congregation, one that offered a new choice to the broader community with respect to how they might worship at LPCC? A service that is designed to engage a younger demographic: young parents with small children, young adults, college students from Glendale. A service designed around supper (so that you don’t have to cook when you get home and so that you can socialize over food with friends), around weekend schedules (so that you can be there after a weekend away). And a service with contemporary music and a message focused on the unique concerns of this specific audience. It might look like this:

6:00 pm – **Gathering:** coffee, healthy cold drinks available in community room.

6:00 – Childcare available for ages 0 to 4 from 6 pm to 9 pm, offering parents a “break,” to spend time with people their own age.

6:30 pm – **Mealtime!** A healthy, catered light buffet dinner with people gathering around tables in the Community Room. (joy, community, caring values)

7:00 pm – **Worship!** Half-an-hour, in the Sanctuary. Contemporary music from a band (Volunteer? Professional? the 10:30 am guest?); a brief meditation; a prayer, and done by 7:30.

(joy, growth, moral compass, thought provoking values)

meanwhile

7:00 – **Sunday School** through grade 5 (no youth program—we would like them to attend worship that will be real, relatable to them as well). (intergenerational value)
7:00 – **Childcare** continues through worship till 9 p.m.
7:30 – **Youth sports/socializing/homework** in Fellowship Room. Dodgeball, basketball, maybe drama practice for next Sunday, community building. A homework room with aides! (joy, community, intergenerational values)
7:30 – **Adult education/movie discussion/book discussion**. A youth group can meet at this time for fellowship and fun. This part of the evening is strictly optional—though if you’re already at church, why not? Maybe share a beer or a glass of wine with members of your group. (community, thought provoking values)
8:30 – **Conclusion**: regularly scheduled activities end, and people disperse over coffee/cold drinks as they do after the morning service.
9:00 – **Nursery closes**.

It isn’t hard to see how this sort of service, in addition to the morning service, hits a lot of value-buttons. Perhaps most important, though, is that over food and across tables, this service will create opportunity to make new, young friends, thereby growing community. Sermons remain thought provoking and focused on a moral compass and sparking gratitude and social action beyond our walls. But the mode of delivery, and age of the one delivering the sermon fits in with the target demographic.

At this point it needs to be stressed that this sort of programming still needs to be tested by several kinds of research: demographic studies of our neighbourhood, consideration of transit options, expert advice from church consultants experienced in church planting, the UCC’s EDGE office, book study, and even door-to-door visits with our neighbours. The funding plan submitted to the Presbytery for this new worship community includes provisions for using consultants and neighbourhood door-knocking to gauge the exact shape of the evening.

This sort of plan would allow those returning to Toronto from skiing or the cottage to get a meal, spend time in worship, and bring the family home well-fed and ready-for-bed without further cooking and cleaning at home. It would provide young parents with up to three hours of not having to worry about their youngest children (cribs will be needed!), and a way to ease into the work week without having to cook on Sunday nights. It’s a free meal and fellowship for young professionals (who could have their own book club after worship, or similar activity, if they desired). Youth, after worship, might do homework together, help clean up, or just listen to music. All in all this service would build community in a lonely city. We have lots of parking, and on Sunday nights, traffic in the city makes the church very accessible.

To launch such a program would take a year of planning, much marketing, a few test runs, new staff, and budgets for all that as well as music. After a year of preparation, this service would probably start with three monthly test runs in the fall of 2018 and a January 2019 launch. In short, the Sunday evening service would provide an alternative to Sunday mornings, or a supplement for some people who would like to come back, and an opportunity for adults to wind down without having to worry about the kids for a few hours.

This worship program will need a new minister who belongs to the target demographic. It will need to be someone who wants not only to dream new dreams, but who has the skill to engage them. He or she will need to be a very special person.

Here's a very interesting article I read after writing this paper that outlines how another church our American sister denomination, the United Church of Christ, did it. <http://tinyurl.com/k3lcn3t> Here are two websites that describe different types of alternative services. The first is an evangelical model that a liberal church like ours could learn from. The second is a liberal Unitarian Universalist congregation. <http://tinyurl.com/jqcev32> and <http://tinyurl.com/hgsjzbu>

There is More to Think About

How would the two services, morning and evening, fit together? Won't we lose attendance at the morning service? Will we see our favourite people on a regular basis if they go to the "other," service? All good questions. Here are a few thoughts.

The two services are unique, and so some people will only attend the service that fits their mode for worship. This means that there is potential that morning service attendance will decline in the short-term. However, we shouldn't sell the morning service short. We're also enhancing it, after all, investing in it. It is growing now. So the ultimate plan is for growth in numbers at that service too! Of course, this will be over time, and the growth will be mostly (I think) in our older demographic.

People will also drift between the two services from week to week. Perhaps coming home from the cottage, parents who normally attend in the morning service will come in the evening rather than not at all. Perhaps people who like the morning service just fine will attend the evening service occasionally with friends or for the sake of teens. Perhaps evening service attendees will be curious about the morning service and try it out, and like it, or join the choir. But this travel back and forth between services will help create a sense that though there are two worship services, there is one congregation, one church council, and we're doing this together.

The evening service may also be a great opportunity for clubs and small groups to get together without necessarily going to worship.

But let's be honest about all this. Significant growth and a healthy future won't come our way unless we are willing to run some risks, and to engage in some entrepreneurial thinking about what we do on Sundays. While we're already good at smiling when we succeed, we also need to learn how to say, "Well that didn't work, what can we try next?" in case of failure. In fact, unless we are willing to occasionally fail, we will never be certain that we have tried the right strategies that lead to flourishing. Similarly, doing the same things we do now will at best lead to marginal growth over many years. We are in a good place to make a smart, forward looking investment in the future now. Why wait till we're in crisis mode? We don't have to!

The bottom line? We have to diversify our offerings to diversify the kind of people who would risk taking in a worship experience. There are probably thousands of churches in Toronto.

For those considering church and those who have never gone to church, we need to offer more and better reasons to these people to come to LPCC.

The Three Initiatives: 3) Member Initiatives

The easiest of the new initiatives to explain is the third one. In brief, council and many members of the congregation have noticed that activities that are led by enthusiastic members who just go off and do it—succeed. This is an organic, bottom-up way of doing church. Our Art Show, Refugee Committee, Youth choir doing Hamilton, Rummage sale, Group B, a book club or two, Tai Chi, Monday Meditation are all examples of members choosing to do something themselves and following through. Since they wanted to do it, no one strong-armed them. Commitment is very high. Success is often very impressive. And through it all the values of the church are lived, promoted and learned.

On our values Sunday, we tallied the lists and discovered that a few activities consistent with our values received only a few mentions. But they're all good ideas. The third initiative is to give members permission to do these things if they wish. We support the idea that the programs most likely to succeed are the ones members freely initiate. Council note that the following activities were mentioned more than once.

1) A youth advisory council, 2) youth representation on council, 3) a mentorship program, 4) all-ages game/play evenings, 5) business/personal finances education or mentoring by experienced congregational members, 6) opportunities for members to share their cultural backgrounds, 7) some sort of coordinated help-centre for the neighbourhood—childcare, illness, etc., 8) picking a social issue on which to make a public congregational stand, 9) parenting support classes, 10) a labyrinth, 11) a community “heroes” award, given annually.

What Will It Cost? How Do We Pay For It?

It goes without saying that the first two initiatives will be expensive. The actual budget is, for now, something that has to be calculated. But among the items to be budgeted for in support of both initiatives one and two are: a second minister with primary responsibility to plan and launch the new worshipping community, community engagement for both services, worship resources for both services, more emphasis on food/catering, marketing via direct mail, etc.

A detailed budget for the first thirty months for a second worshipping community has been put together for an application to Presbytery to support this strategic initiative to the tune of 100,000 dollars (decreasing annually) for ten years. The congregation's contribution, perhaps through the mortgage mechanism mentioned above, for both worship community initiatives will be in the range of 100,000 to 200,000 dollars (decreasing annually) for ten years as well.