

soul

TABLE

Evaluation Report

August 24th, 2020

Lawrence Park Community Church

**Rev. Stephen Milton
Rev. Dr John Suk**

Executive Summary

- **What:** Soul Table was an alternative form of in-person community gathering that met on Sunday evenings at 5 p.m. at Lawrence Park Community Church, in a large gym. It featured guest speakers, a band that played secular music, and a free dinner. It was hosted by the church's two ministers. The talks were based on four key themes: non-denominational spirituality, social justice, nature and urban issues.
- **When:** Soul Table began in September of 2019, and ended in-person gatherings on March 8, 2020, due to the pandemic. It lived online for six weeks afterwards until the end of April, 2020.
- **Who came:** Soul Table consistently drew more newcomers than LPCC members to each gathering. They were mostly people 50 and older, although there were some younger members. Some of those people have chosen LPCC as their church of choice, and have stuck around even during the pandemic, so Soul Table did achieve some church growth.
- **Attendance:** The average attendance over the six months was 45 people, which on any given night could range from 24 to 88. The Strategic Initiative hoped that by the end of 12 months, an average of 60 people would be attending. Soul Table was three-quarters of the way there after half a year's operation, so it would likely have met the 60 person average had the pandemic not intervened.
- **Budget:** Soul Table was deficit-financed by the church, and also relied on grant money. The Strategic Initiative hoped that collections from attendees would amount to fourteen thousand dollars in the program's first year. Half-way through the year, by the beginning of March 2020, Soul table had collected \$11,322.65 (givings and money at the door). Had the pandemic not occurred, Soul Table would have easily reached and likely surpassed the \$14k benchmark.
- **Analysis:** Soul Table would likely have met both its attendance and financial benchmarks. However, it did not attract the younger demographic (under 40) in any significant numbers. In the pandemic era, how any church or alternative church plans in-person gatherings will have to be rethought, which is outside the scope of this report (although we are thinking about it – a lot.)



Introduction

This report is meant to provide an overview of Soul Table's performance from September 2019 to March, 2020. The report was originally intended to be tabled by June of 2020. However, the pandemic put all plans into disarray, so this draft report is being presented in August of 2020. The pandemic did not only delay this report, but it also led to the premature end of Soul Table. The last in-person gathering was on March 8th. We did offer Soul Table online for six weeks afterwards, but it only attracted LPCC regulars. Since Soul Table was meant to attract new people to the church, it was decided in May to shut down Soul Table until further notice. This report was meant to evaluate Soul Table's in-person performance until June of 2020. That was not possible, so in this report we consider how Soul Table was doing until the shut down, and we offer some extrapolations about what would have happened had the pandemic not interrupted the program.

The report is divided in two parts.

The first is a descriptive report by Rev. Stephen Milton, based on data provided by Judi Pressman, and our accounting department. This section describes Soul Table, the thinking behind its design, who attended, what kinds of talks drew the biggest crowds, and how the program performed relative to the expectations in the Strategic Initiative.

(Background on the genesis of Soul Table is provided in a report by Rev. Dr John Suk in Appendix 1)

The second part of this report provides reflections on Soul Table by Rev. Stephen Milton, who was the presiding minister for ST, and by Dr Rev. John Suk, who conceived Soul Table, and also participated in its execution.

There is also an Appendix, which provides background on how Soul Table came about, as well as detailed data on attendance and our social media presence.



Part 1: What is Soul Table?



Background

Soul Table was conceived as part of LPCC's Strategic Initiative. The intention was to create a second service which could become a source of new community within the church, and hopefully, create a foundation for the future, in parallel with the Sunday morning service. Unlike the regular church service, Soul Table was aimed at people who were not explicitly Christian, and probably would not want to attend a Sunday morning service. It was assumed that what people crave now is not faith but community. Soul Table sought to attract people who were interested in smart and interesting talks about a variety of topics, and who would appreciate a chance to share their stories with each other, break bread together, and form a community of like-minded people. There was no expectation that the attendees would hear an explicitly Christian message. It was hoped that over a period of a few years, Soul Table would become a sort of secular church, based on ethics, compassion and community. This might bring new members to the LPCC morning service, or it might simply become a new community within LPCC. (For more detail on the original reasoning for Soul Table, see please Rev. Dr John Suk's report in Appendix 1)

In the original proposal, it was assumed that Soul Table would receive funding for ten years, both from the church and from the regional United Church. In actuality, Soul Table received a three year grant of \$270K from the United Church (NMLDF), and the balance of funds from LPCC. The last year of those grant funds coincided with the launch of Soul Table full-time in September of 2019.

Soul Table Launches Full Time

Soul Table launched as a weekly gathering in September of 2019. A presiding minister was hired, Rev. Stephen Milton, and a program manager, Judi Pressman, worked on marketing, promotion, production and day of managing of the meetings. There had been five* pilot gatherings of Soul Table in the two years before. These were to figure out logistics – which room to use, how to serve food and drink, room configurations. Over the summer of 2019, Stephen and program manager Judi Pressman planned the fall gatherings. The basic format was already set. Each Sunday night, people would gather in the Community Hall (a large gym), to eat a free buffet dinner, while a band played jazz in the background. There would be an MC, a keynote speaker, some Q&A , some secular songs by the band, and a prayer.

Who Should Speak?

The question was who should we invite to speak, and what should they talk about? In the summer, a speaker list had been drawn up which was largely composed of motivational speakers. They were not feasible for two reasons: their message tended to be highly individualistic (just reach inside and find your inner strength), and their starting price was seven thousand dollars, and usually a lot more. The Soul Table budget could not afford them.

The other question was what should ST speakers talk about? Since we did not have an established audience yet, Rev. Stephen Milton decided to guess. He suggested that we book speakers to talk on four broad topics: spirituality (broadly defined), nature (ecology), social justice, and the city (how to make Toronto a liveable place). When we priced speakers who could talk about these issues, we faced the same problem as before. Prominent speakers on the environment cost twenty thousand dollars, as did people like former TTC chair, Jennifer Keesmat.

To solve this problem, we adopted a strategy of mixed price speakers. Each month we would try to book one high-priced, high profile speaker. One other speaker would be one of LPCC's two ministers, and the other nights of the month would feature less expensive speakers. These latter



Michel Chikwanine, Nov 17th.

speakers were often people who were experts in their field, but not regulars on the public speaking circuit. They had a message they felt passionately about, such as banning handguns or ending homelessness. What they lacked in polish they made up for in passion and credibility. They often didn't charge anything, yet still drew decent sized crowds (80-90 people). This seemed to be a sustainable formula.

Marketing

To publicize Soul Table, we relied on a variety of marketing tools. We produced striking posters, which were put up around the church, featuring each month's roster of speakers. These were inspired by rock concert posters. Smaller posters for each speaker were distributed at York University across the street, and we paid for distribution in bars around the city. We also had an aggressive social media campaign, largely through Facebook, and to some extent on Instagram. Video promos of most speakers were made in the week or two before their appearance at ST. Facebook advertising cost about 100 dollars a week, often less (depending on how much a post was shared). We also gathered the emails of those who attended, so our weekly Soul Table email grew to 350 people.



We also posted our events on Eventbrite and Meet Up. Eventbrite was used for getting reservations, and also proved to be a way people discovered us. In practice, there was a wide gap between the number of people who booked online and who actually showed up. Sometimes it was large on Eventbrite, but much smaller in person, and sometimes the reverse. In one case, trolls over-booked us, and then a small crowd showed up since it seemed like we were sold out (Doctors against Handguns).

A typical Soul Table night:

In the afternoon, volunteers, usually LPCC church members, would arrive at 2 p.m. to start work on the light dinner, and get the cash bar set up. At 4 p.m. the four-person band would arrive to set up, and start rehearsing. The slide show would be prepared in the afternoon by Stephen, to be projected on the wall, and later, the big screen. At 5 p.m., guests would start arriving. They were greeted by volunteers at the door, given name tags and guided to the



Community Hall. When they entered, they would be greeted again, the band was playing light jazz, and they would be invited to find a seat at the long rows of tables. There was a basket for cash donations at the front. At 5:15, food was laid out (we later changed this to 5 p.m.). At 5:45, the MC (one of the ministers, usually Stephen) would get the evening started. The typical structure of the event was as follows:

5:45: MC welcomes the crowd, introduces the theme of the night.

5:50: Band plays a secular song consistent with that theme. Lyrics projected in case anyone wants to sing along.

5:55: MC talks about what Soul Table is about, mentions some upcoming speakers. Sometimes talked about an international Day of Peace or something day which inspires this evening's theme.

6:00: Passing of the Peace. Everyone is invited to get up and say hello to people they don't know, which is most of the crowd.

6:03: MC introduces the main speaker

6:05: Speaker talks for 15-20 minutes.

6:20ish: Q&A. (Note, some speakers, including the ministers, would do talks which encouraged a few sessions of audience participation within their talk, so there was no Q&A afterwards).

6:40: Band plays a song.

6:45: MC says a prayer (to whoever you think is in charge of universe)

6:48: MC's closing remarks, upcoming speakers, encourage people to stick around after the service to hang out, band will keep playing.

6: 51: Band plays one last song.

6:55: Good night.

6:55- 7:15ish: some people hangout, band has kept playing.

Attendance

The attendance was up and down, depending on the speakers and the topics. There were a few weeks when gatherings could not be held, due to the annual art show, a snowstorm, Christmas, and in March when the pandemic lockdown began. In April we did try to hold Soul Table online, with pre-recorded music and live speakers via Zoom. However, this did not work. Attendance crashed to 15-20 people, and



Looking for meaning in your life?

JUSTICE
SOUL
TABLE
CITY
NATURE

Food • Music • Soul • Conversation

Let's find it together.

Spirituality on the Move with Rev. Stephen Milton
Why do people go on spiritual pilgrimages? Why would walking to a place be just as important as arriving? Join Rev. Stephen Milton as he reflects on the appeal of pilgrimages, and reflects on his own recent Camino pilgrimage in Portugal and Spain.
Sunday, February 2 at 5 PM

Love Song Karaoke
Get in the mood for Valentine's Day and join us for Love Song Karaoke. From gushing ballads to pop and rock we've got you covered. Our band, Jesse and Friends will be there to lead the singing.
Sunday, February 9 at 5 PM

Thin Places with Rev. John Suk
We all need places/times in our lives where there is a bit of heaven and Earth all mixed up, that inspire us for a deeper, more meaningful path through life, in our career, at home or in the arts. Thin places can include the arts, church, a group of very best friends, and even a place like Soul Table. We aim to be a thin place for those seeking a bit of heaven (or nirvana, or whatever you dream of) here and now.
Sunday, February 16 at 5 PM

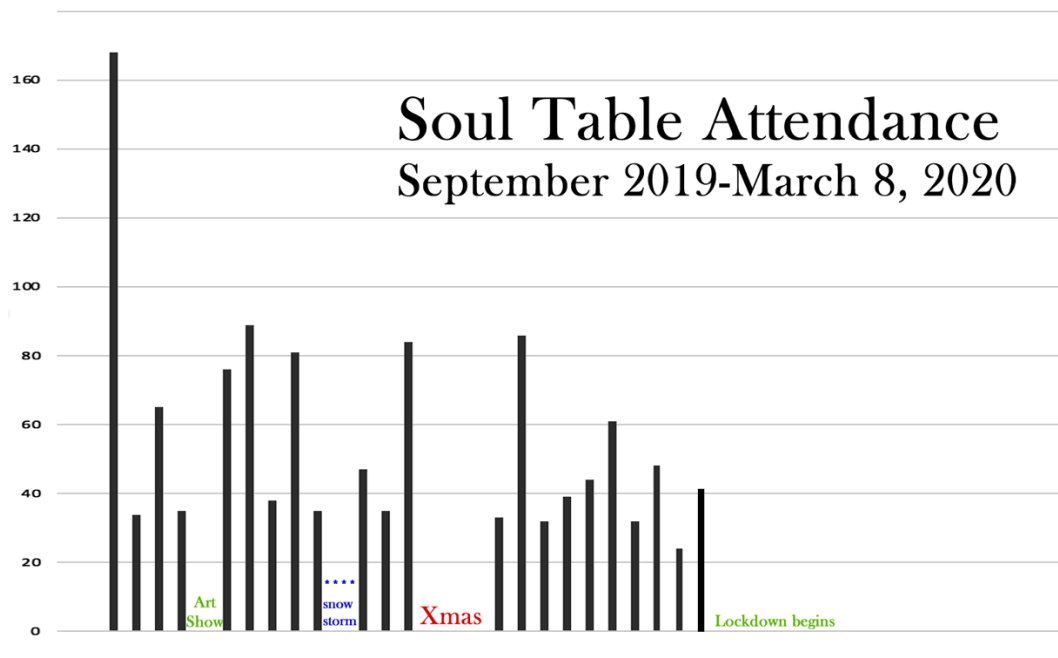
Refugee Border Crisis
Rev. Alexa Gilmour and Jenn McIntyre of Romero House share their story of going down to the Mexican border to talk to refugees trying to enter the United States. They found heartache and hope, and a surprising role for Canada. Come find out the facts behind the headlines.
Sunday, February 23 at 5 PM

Doors open 5 PM • Light dinner • Talk and Q&A • Parking available
RSVP at www.soultable.ca • 2180 Bayview Avenue, Toronto

soul TABLE soultable.ca [/SoulTable](https://www.facebook.com/soultable) [@soul_table](https://www.instagram.com/soultable) [/soultablepcc](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)

all of them were from our morning congregation. As this was not the aim of Soul Table, we decided to pause the program until further notice.

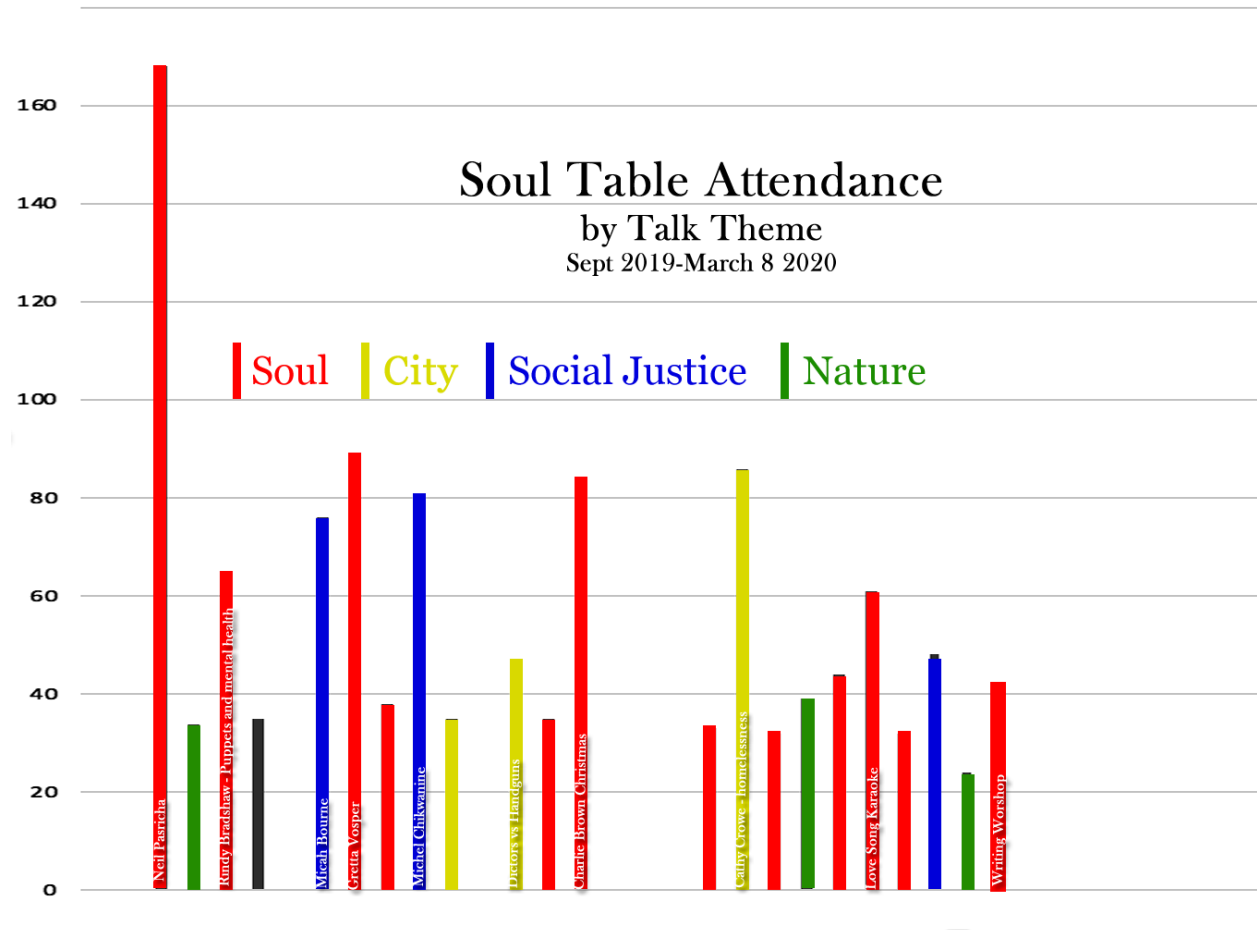
The Strategic initiative hoped that by the end of the first year, Soul Table would have an average attendance of 60 people a week. By early March, we were seeing an average of 45 people a week, so we were doing reasonably well, and numbers may have reached the benchmark had a full year elapsed. Due to the lockdown, we will never know.



In practice, attendance varied from lows of 24 to highs of almost ninety (not counting the first night). It became clear that some topics were of greater interest than others. The social justice and city talks were the best attended, while the soul and nature talks trailed far behind. The first speaker of the season was Neil Pasricha, who drew a big crowd, which we never matched again. He came thanks to a family connection with the church, and represented a price level our budget could not normally afford (we got a deal). If we take his talk out of the numbers, then spiritual talks averaged 47.9, much lower than either social justice or city talks. Moreover, the spiritual talks include two music nights, the Charlie Brown Christmas, and the Love Song Karaoke nights, both of which were much better attended than any of the spiritual talks given by the ministers.

Average attendance based on theme:

- Soul : 56.5 (including Neil Pasricha)
- Soul (without Neil Pasricha): 47.9.
- Social justice : 61.
- City: 83

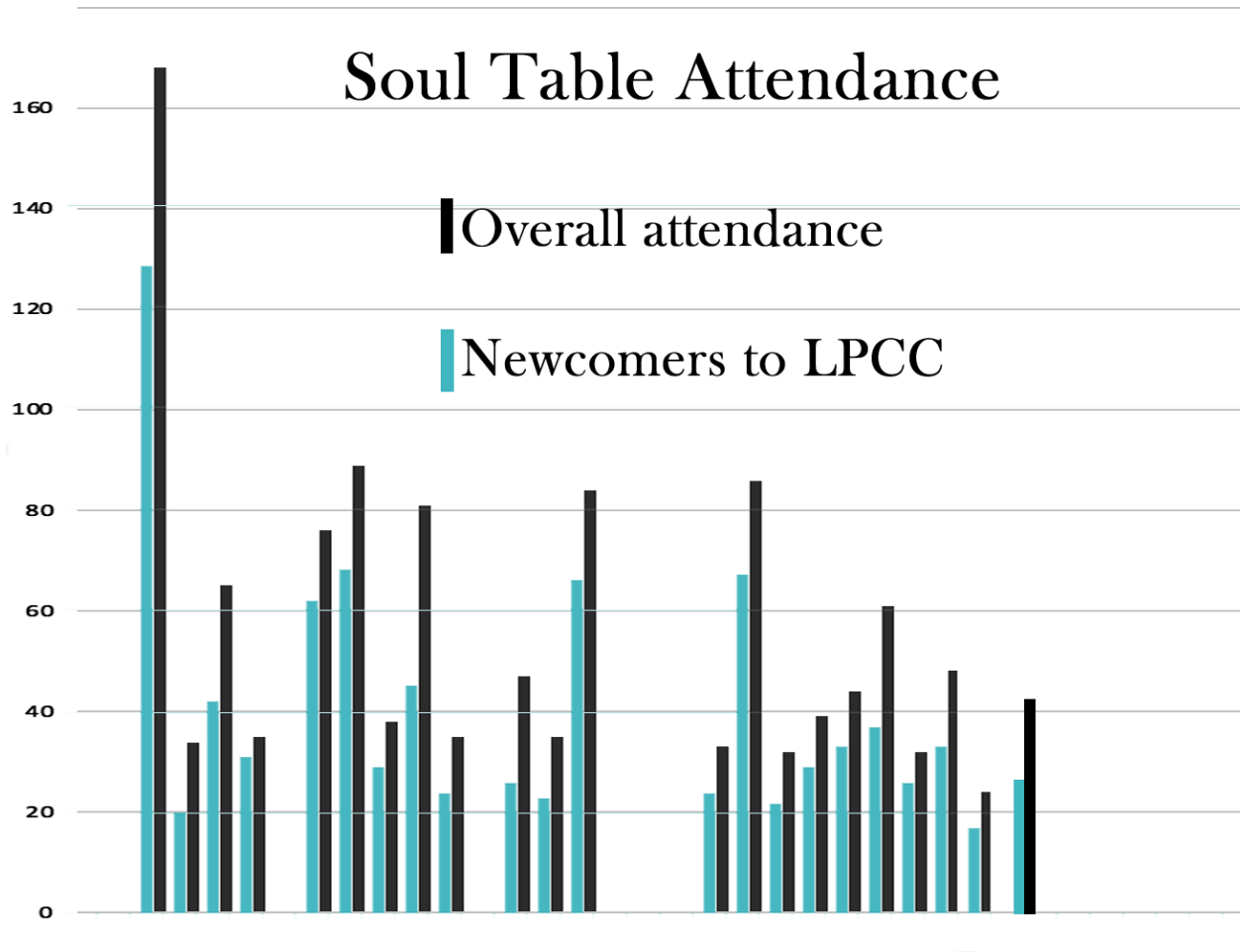


Many of the City topics could also be counted as social justice (handguns, homelessness), so the social justice numbers would be even higher, at 67.6. The spiritual numbers were consistently lower, although it should be mentioned that our spiritual nights were often on long weekends, and featured the lesser known ministers of our congregation. That being said, these were often the most intimate and interesting nights, when we cemented relationships with people who were repeat attenders.

Who Came

Soul Table succeeded in bringing new people into the building. On every night, newcomers to LPCC outnumbered members of the Sunday morning congregation. They came in response to our online marketing, word of mouth, and some due to our posters in and out of the church. Broadly speaking, we found that two distinct populations were attending. There were people who were primarily interested in social issues, who first came for a social justice or city talk, and some of whom then started attending more

regularly, usually for similar talks. A smaller group came for the spiritual talks, and would attend even on long weekends. They were very loyal and consistent, but also a bit on the flaky side. In terms of age, most of the people who came more than once were over 40, usually over 50. The one population who did not show up much was the under-40 demographic. They came in large numbers for the Neil Pasricha talk, but after that, they were always the minority in the room. This may reflect the fact that this age cohort does not attend many kinds of public meetings, aside from concerts and movies.



It should be noted that some of the people who first came to Soul Table have been drawn into the LPCC orbit, even during the pandemic period. There are now people who attend our Sunday morning service (in person before lockdown and online after) who first came to us from Soul Table. There are people from this group who also attend our online meditation sessions, prayer services, Bible studies and other online gatherings. It is not a large group, perhaps ten people, but they now consider us their church.

Attendance Challenges

We faced a few challenges in terms of attendance. One constant thorn in our side was the TTC. Virtually every weekend during the fall and winter, the Yonge line was shut down in one direction or both, north of Bloor. If young people without cars wanted to come, they would have to take shuttle buses, which is fine at 10 a.m. when there is little traffic, but a real problem at 4:45 p.m. when Yonge is clogged with cars. By virtue of the TTC, our attendees were facing a subway ride, then a shuttle bus, then a connecting bus. That made our location even more remote than usual. People could use Uber to reach us, but we are still far away from the kind of housing which younger people can afford. Our location appears to be an issue, exacerbated by TTC shutdowns. Statistically, most of the people who attended were from Toronto and Scarborough (See Appendix *). There were people who drove in from places as far away as Guelph, although these were certainly a minority.



It is also possible that our Sunday night slot was a problem. Regular church goers would probably be less inclined to go to a regular service the same night as their morning service. This would be an issue for social justice, nature and city themed nights. In addition, for people who work downtown, there may have been reticence to go downtown again for a Sunday night talk. If we were to do a service again, we might consider a weeknight slot.

Attendance Benchmarks

The Strategic Initiative expected that after a year of meeting, Soul Table was supposed to reach a goal of 60 regular attendees. And after two years, that number was supposed to grow to 75. Finally, after ten years, each community within LPCC—morning and Soul Table was to have 150 weekly attendees, for 300 in total, a 300% increase over where we were in September of 2019.

It appears that Soul Table was on its way to meeting this first year target. Over its first six months, we had an average attendance of 45 people, with three months to go, which we missed because of the pandemic. Late February and March were times of growing anxiety about gathering in large groups, so our attendance probably suffered as result. Had Soul Table continued without a pandemic, we might well have reached 60 people on average, or come quite close.

Funding Benchmarks

Soul Table provided a basket at the front door of the Community Hall for free will offerings. In 2020, we did try to pass the basket around for a couple of weeks, but the results were no better than before, so we stopped. Psychologically, people thought that the money was for the food, both among our visitors and in our accounting department. This meant that within LPCC, there was a view that any money Soul Table received should be considered as part of the food budget. I (Stephen) think this way of seeing the funds is unwise. If we were a Catholic Church that served communion every week, no one would think that the collection plate's funds were to pay solely for the wine and the wafers. We ministers never asked anyone to pay only for the food, indeed, we made it clear that the donations were for the entire service. We never asked people why they were donating. Of the people who clearly came primarily for the food, they were the least likely to donate (this was a small group of low income people).

In that light, here are the numbers for our collections:

Money received at the door, in cash and via cash machine:

Sept - Dec 2019 \$5119.65
Jan- March 8, 2020: \$2433.

Total: \$7552.65

Money received in additional givings (cheques, monthly donations):

Sept- Dec 2019: \$1450.

Jan-March 8 2020: \$2320

Total: \$3770.

Total of all collections for Soul Table September 2019,-March 8, 2020: \$11,322.65.

Average monthly donations based on the numbers above: \$1887.10.

Projected donations by end of June had ST stayed open: \$18,871.08.

Financial Plan Expected givings by September 2020: \$14,000.00

The Financial Plan for Soul Table hoped that we would be able to collect 14,000 dollars in its first year of operations, and we were on track for exceeding that number months earlier. By the beginning of March we were at 11k, so in two more months we could have reached 14k had the pandemic not shut us down.

Part 2: Analysis

In this section, we provide perspectives from the two ministers who worked on Soul Table.

Rev. Stephen Milton's perspective:

Soul Table was moderately successive in its goals. It did bring new people into the church, and they consistently outnumbered the morning congregation people who attended. Soul Table was valued by these new regulars. However, there were two distinct groups among these regulars. One group was interested in social issues, while the other group, which was smaller, was interested in spirituality. I do not think that a new form of church could have been built out of the spiritual group. They were a bit on the flaky side, and provided very little in terms of money at the door (often none). They were attracted by the non-doctrinal stance of the gatherings, but for the same reason, were not interested in joining anything. I doubt we could make a new form of church out of these folks. They arrived because they do not like to commit, and as a result, would not be likely to sit on a committee or become a volunteer base. This reflects a basic problem – our spiritual talks, being non-doctrinal, lacked passion and conviction. We couldn't proselytize our faith, so there was no option for igniting the kind of passion which is necessary to create a new community. Wishy-washy spirituality won't grow a new church.

If I had to bet who we could build a new church on, I would choose the people who showed up for the social justice and city talks. They came in larger numbers on average, and were more passionate about the issues. They clearly appreciated a chance to get together with like-minded people to talk about serious issues. These talks did attract some younger people. Among the 40+ crowd, I could see those people serving on committees and acting as volunteers for social justice activities, since those would be consistent with theme of the gatherings.

One of the key themes in church growth literature is that a church needs to be for someone other than itself, and it must inspire passion. What I saw this year was that the spiritual talks were too vague to inspire any passion. They attracted people who are inherently non-committal, and whose true passion was for their own personal spiritual well-being. They appreciated what we offered, but their self-interest made them unlikely to help run Soul Table. The social justice people are more likely to commit, since the goals are clear, and, crucially, they care about someone other than just themselves. That is a key difference between the two groups which has important implications for going forward with this kind of gathering. Evangelicals do have young people in their congregations, but these are people who come for a passionate commitment, with eternal rewards. No-name spirituality, which is what we were offering, does not have that kind of potential. If we are to do this again, we need to choose a direction which contains

the possibility, even the necessity, for passionate commitment. A social justice emphasis seems like the more likely approach, given our church's DNA. This would also mean that we could continue to feature a variety of speakers, without needing a charismatic preacher to carry the entire load.

In a separate report next month, I will suggest ways in which this approach might be turned into an online as well as in-person program that could be more attractive to young people.



The poster features a purple background with a central circular logo for 'soul TABLE'. The logo is surrounded by four colored circles labeled 'CITY', 'NATURE', 'JUSTICE', and 'SOUL'. The text 'Looking for meaning in your life?' is on the left and 'Let's find it together.' is on the right. A pink banner across the middle reads 'Food • Music • Soul • Conversation'. Below this are four speaker profiles, each with a photo and a microphone icon to the right. The profiles are: Rev. Stephen Milton (New Year, New You), Cathy Crowe (Why are People Homeless in Toronto?), Rachel Clark (Equal Rights for All), and Bruce Lourie (Sustainability - How are we doing?). At the bottom, a pink banner provides event details: 'Doors open 5 PM • Free light dinner • Free talk and Q&A • Free parking' and 'RSVP at www.soultable.ca • 2180 Bayview Avenue, Toronto'.

Looking for meaning in your life?

Let's find it together.

soul TABLE

Food • Music • Soul • Conversation

NEW YEAR, NEW YOU

Rev. Stephen Milton - New Year, New You?
There are lots of suggestions for how to improve ourselves. But maybe the real problem isn't you, but the way the world sees you - and wants you to see yourself.
Sunday, January 5 at 5 PM

Cathy Crowe - Why are People Homeless in Toronto?
As the homelessness numbers rise it has been accompanied by great suffering, inhumane shelter conditions, new disease outbreaks, and clusters of homeless deaths. What can be done?
Sunday, January 12 at 5 PM

Rachel Clark - Equal Rights for All
Rachel represents the LGBT community and especially transgender and genderqueer people. Rachel will speak about equal rights for all regardless of your sexual identity.
Sunday, January 19 at 5 PM

Bruce Lourie - Sustainability - How are we doing?
What works, and what doesn't? This is something our civilization needs to figure out - but what's the best approach, and why aren't we getting there now?
Sunday, January 26 at 5 PM

Doors open 5 PM • Free light dinner • Free talk and Q&A • Free parking
RSVP at www.soultable.ca • 2180 Bayview Avenue, Toronto

Rev. Dr John Suk's Perspective

John's List of Evaluation Comments and Questions that Need Further Reflection

1. The audience that came was held down (in part) due to weekend transit woes. Or was it? Is it possible that the audience we thought would come by transit (younger, hipper, living downtown) were never going to come given our speaker lineup, our concept, our marketing, our location off of the subway line (in any case).

And how will we figure out the answers to these sort of questions?

2. While it is true (as Stephen has recently observed) that a large number of younger people live their lives (beyond work and in family) online, it is also true that in a city as large as Toronto, a large number (even if small percentage) of younger people do not, or at least are not constrained by their online lives to do other things. Two younger adults who are members of this congregation do not come, for example, because of basketball and/or dodge ball dates.

Large numbers of young people (even if not a majority!) leave home to go to Evangelical churches, Mass, shopping, the beach, bars, the gym, restaurants, and sports events. This does not mean that they will therefore come to something like Soul Table. Online life might seem much more attractive to most younger people than a lecture with food. But before we assume that the obvious solution is moving Soul Table in some version all online, we need to ask what sort of in person events/activities might help such a community gel and actually get to be a community. Volunteering for soup kitchens? Pub Theology? Dodgeball? Cooking classes? Who knows? How do we know?

3. Could a strong online presence and audience generate the support required to fund the church's ministries? What are the revenue streams? Ads? Donations? What does this look like?

4. I am intrigued by Stephen's mention of the Jordan Peterson phenomenon in one of our conversations. That began with (as I understand it) pointed, counter-cultural, self-help lectures that disturbed the peace. Along with a strong online presence to promote those counter-cultural (and I'd say mostly dumb) opinions. One marketing ploy we have not tried (that Stephen has mused about) is a series of short online talks.



But the internet is full of such short videos and blogs. So, have we thought about the other things that Peterson had that helped him grow an audience? Charisma? A pointed self-help message? The ability to ruffle feathers enough so that everyone wanted to see what it was all about? A real success would be going viral with something, becoming a meme. Can we think our way into that? (I doubt that even Peterson did—he happened along with the right charisma and message at the right time to grow).

5. Someone we could learn from when we think about living online who is a lot closer to what we're about is Peter Rollins. Peter is an Irish radical theologian influenced by John Caputo. He does what he calls "pyrotheology." He has a robust online presence (<https://peterrollins.com>, Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/peter_rollins/, Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCweF6BScvFnbsymoul-znDA>) He's a prolific author. He always offends (just enough to get your attention, at least). He has charisma. He's smart, too, and really adept at reading contemporary culture. He has done pyro churches in New York (it closed) and Dublin. He does frequent personal appearances, retreats, classes—both on the web (his main haunt) and in person. He's no Jordan Peterson when it comes to worldwide fame, but for a theologian he is huge, irreverent, funny, and important. We studied his *Divine Magician* at LPCC for six weeks, once. I'm thinking that before we decide on what is next, we need to look at someone like Rollins very hard, and ask if we can do that, with our perspective (Rollins is me—but not everyone at LPCC), in Toronto. Whatever the theology is in itself, Rollins has also figured out a lot about how to reach people online with a spiritual message in the Christian tradition.

6. Money. Pastorally, and in terms of overall church support and understanding, financing was always and will probably remain a challenge. Elsewhere I noted that while we began with a view to borrowing LPCC's share of start-up funds, against our property value, we shifted our thinking gradually to a model where we would use up our endowment funds (perhaps 500k on a good day) first, and not borrow money.

But even given the original ten-year budget plan, we will need a lot more money than 500k to successfully launch Soul Table—even with the 270K help we have already received from Presbytery/Region. Where is all this money going to come from? And how will we bring the congregation, the actual financiers, along?

7. Going forward, and related to the money issue above, how many staff does LPCC need, doing what sorts of things, and how does that compare to what LPCC can afford? With John retiring the financial pressure is reduced, I think, for now. But clearly, whatever model for moving ahead with Soul Table or its child is settled on, the work will require lots of time and effort.



There is a practical financial observation to be made here. The average pastor's salary in Toronto, for all churches, is about 46K. That would include a number of United Church data points with much higher salaries. And yet the UCC guidelines call for a starting salary for ministers in Toronto to be around 68-70k. What is more, my observation is that when Evangelicals plant churches, their pastors often do so as tentmakers—as ministers who work for next to nothing, while doing another job, in order to get the church plant done. That isn't even allowed in the UCC.

Here is a huge structural impediment to new ideas, new initiatives and so on. Not that our ministers are not worth their salt. But paying UCC ministers the Toronto environment is so expensive that we will necessarily be outmanned (-womaned) by almost every other denomination out there when it comes to the resources needed to do "new" things. Our feet are leaden and our imagination is tied to highly-paid ministers like me. That constrains our options for new ideas and approaches.

8. Music. I liked Soul Table music. I liked that the musicians had affinity with the United Church. I liked that they were young. But my (unschooled) opinion is that they didn't have much connection with our audiences—maybe in part because of their physical location in the gym? Maybe in part because a large part of our audience couldn't hear themselves talk when music (even if it was traditional hymns) was playing as well. Our group's music was (because we chose it?) mostly kind of old too (Rock'n-Dawgs-plus-one-generation music). I don't know . . . it wasn't what a younger audience would come out for? I'm thinking?

9. I confess that from the beginning, I hoped for a physical community in our present church location. Doug Steiner urged us to think outside that box, and we talked a bit as leadership about other ideas. So that results in a lot of wondering about transit and parking and geography, touch on in number 1, above.

But I am not sure that the building itself worked, even if the geographical location was okay. I remember a lunch with a Toronto music producer (Douglas Romanow, who also has studios in LA and Nashville) where we talked about our Soul Table idea. I hoped that Doug would put us onto some musicians (he did—too expensive). But he also came to take a look at the church, and he stated that the aesthetics of the gym would never work

without a big redo. The music needed to be more visible, the setting more intimate, the ceiling bedecked with floaters and lights and posters, the walls filled with art, and the list went on. He said that it wasn't just a matter of turning out an audience, it had to be a matter of wanting them to like the destination and be able to "groove," there.



I heard him and knew that our budget couldn't afford the 50 or 100k he was talking about. We were way more shoestring. Still, just because we couldn't afford his advice, doesn't mean that what we did in its place was going to work, or at least not work against us.

All of which brings me back to Stephen's notion that we have to be online. Maybe. But I'd add, then, "online with breakout groups," at pubs, at seminars, at the occasional lecture, at movies, at games, at soup kitchens . . .

10. Food took a lot of grief and care and concern to pull together. It filled our minds with lots of practical details and the worries that go with accomplishing the details. But all this, in turn, took away from the deeper planning we needed to do, the better analysis, and the other activities that we could have done to start binding a community together or to gather our target audience.

11. More Food. Some of Soul Table's audience came mostly to eat. We designed Soul Table as a place for table fellowship, too. On the other hand, Soul Table was not designed mostly to feed those who don't have food security (as Out of the Cold is designed). Soul Table meals were meant as a way of using table fellowship to build community in our target audience (along with many other strategies).

My observation is that we didn't really know what to do with and for those who came mostly to eat. We feared (secretly) that their presence might work against getting the audience we really wanted. We (I, at least) didn't like dealing with the complications such audience members presented, and felt a bit guilty about such concerns.

Still, if we go with something like Soul Table again, I think we really need to face this and work it out, because feeding the hungry, like visiting the prisoner or clothing the naked, is a good thing to do (even if there are other good things to do too, like building a new and active congregation in our space). And while Soul Table as conceived was a hard thing to accomplish, doing Soul Table with food security as a core concern isn't any easier.

12. The any-religion-lite approach did not at any time get anyone riled up. It fits the time (and my convictions). Peter Rollins is an example of how radical theology can resonate (though, honestly, he needs an audience around the whole world to make it happen).

And yet, I confess that this theological direction also has a lot to do with where I (and a few LPCC leaders) are at rather than a considered consensus about where the church is at or should go. I have consciously striven to be a church where we listen to the heart of God, but don't ask God to do anything for us (see John Caputo, again). Not everyone is there. But we are a big tent church designed to bring everyone along, respectfully so. We have not had big theological controversies since Ken Gallinger was here. And lots of people don't think too deeply about these things. What am I trying to say? That the peace I've enjoyed over the past eight or nine years has been golden, and that it has required effort. It is worth preserving. Is/was Soul Table's religion-lite approach right?

13. Soul Table had valuable volunteer help all along the way, from conception through accomplishment. Some of that help was conceptual and some of it was very practical, and some volunteers offered both kinds of help. But by the time we suspended Soul Table we did not have an active, self-starting Soul Table committee that was working with paid employees. The reasons for this are probably many, having to do with (for example) not having a big volunteer pool to start off with, and volunteers having busy lives, and all the other regular reasons. But it didn't help us to have few people we could really lean on, as leaders. And it didn't help the congregation with ownership of the Soul Table initiative that few of them were involved, other than as occasional attendees.

14. It is worth noting that all the Evangelical models for something like a Soul Table launch lean heavily on the idea of a core group working hard for a year or so to develop, out of nothing, a core group of volunteers who will do the launch and stick with the project. These volunteers do music and food and moving of equipment for sound and seating. I've seen this done, too, many times.

Churches that didn't do this "cold" sort of planning/launch often began by hiving off a core group from an established congregation and meeting in homes or restaurants for a year as a new church with a highly motivated core group of volunteers (and a minister who was tentmaking with a part-time job and full-time spouse for income).

The volunteers, in turn, were supposed to bring friends to help out. And since their "thing," was new and exciting and interesting, their friends came. Volunteers were often at the heart of congregational growth.

Did we err (I err) by thinking we could launch Soul Table mostly with staff? Without a core group of volunteers who would help initial growth by bring more volunteers who in turn became more members?

And again—all this is relevant to physical church plant. But does such a church plant even make sense for us?

15. We need to find a way to poll those who came to Soul Table. I'm wondering if we can do some research via interview (probably the most helpful), survey (easiest but data can be sketchy), or focus group (dangerous—hard to get participants to lead with where they are at, rather than the last thing someone in the group said. For experts.) It would be interesting to interview ten participants with identical questions to see whether there are patterns in their reactions—plus, in order to get some hard data about where they heard about us, how they arrived, whether they intended to come back.

Appendices

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Appendix 1

A Brief Introduction and Overview of Soul Table's Genesis and Purpose

Rev. Dr John Suk

The strategic planning process at LPCC began with fits and starts. In 2011 or so, Doug Steiner made a presentation to the congregation that showed how LPCC's decline fit into a Canada-wide pattern that suggested the church might not be financially viable in ten to fifteen years. That got people to thinking.

A small committee began meeting in 2015 to discuss strategic planning. This committee soon ended its work without a report. Another committee began working in 2016 with a narrower mandate. What strategic initiatives might work to extend LPCC's impact in Toronto while also strengthening the congregation to meet survival challenges? Led by Warren Coughlin, the council pondered this for some time. It agreed on a mission and vision, as well as values, and a strategic initiatives plan (these can be found as appendixes to this report). The plan was largely written by John Suk as the process worked its way through council and congregation.

In 2017, the congregation approved the mission, vision, values, and the strategic initiatives. Three main goals were described: 1) enhance morning worship; 2) plant a new congregation aligned with LPCC with a radical new approach to "worship," or "meeting" within our building; and 3) approve member initiatives that could be funded and led by the membership.

LPCC received funding from the UCC's NMLDF fund for a minimum of three years to the tune of 270,000 dollars, with hopes for seven more years of decreasing funding. And the congregation committed to borrowing up to 1.2 million dollars over ten years to see the plan to fruition. Most of these resources were earmarked for Soul Table, a gathering, around food and secular music and great talks about spiritual, ecological, and social justice matters from a non-denominational, non-orthodox point of view.

In Sept 2019 Soul Table, the new community, began meeting. We launched with a talk by Neil Pasricha, author of *The Book of Awesome*. Well over 100 people showed up for an evening of food, drinks, Neil, and contemporary music. It was a wonderful!

Soul Table continued meeting through mid-March of 2020, when it was shut down by COVID-19—along with morning worship.

Some Reflections Rooted in the Strategic Initiative Plan

What did we learn in the five months we met? These reflections are guided by questions that we asked or topics we addressed in the original Strategic Initiatives document, in our application for the NMLDF fund, in our business plan, and our budgets.

1. Does Toronto need LPCC? This is still a key question. If we closed our doors, current members would be very sad, of course. They desire—need—LPCC as a spiritual home, as a community that tries to model Jesus’ command to love one another, and to worship. LPCC is an outlet for their charity—both to the church and through the church to the wider community. The Strategic Initiative Document stated that, “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*.”

2. The Demographic Trap. All the documents associated with the Strategic Initiative discussed the dire demographic realities that LPCC faces. They are well summed in this quote: “... 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 are elderly. We do children’s programming, but not much teen programming, because this demographic is missing. And we have too few members in the 45-65 range. Our [morning] music and liturgy still speak to a resident audience that is not a mirror image of Toronto, or of who we must be to thrive.”

3. What does the future hold? It is still true that, “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.” Or can LPCC continue recruiting 60-year-old new members who will be with us for about twenty years before they pass away?

4. Is there anything to be hopeful about? Toronto is a big city. It is not impossible that our programming will continue to slowly grow our 60 and older demographic enough so that we can continue as we are—albeit in straightened circumstances—for many years. The problem is that Toronto is full of churches like ours fighting for the same demographic or slowly declining, merging, and then slowly declining again.

5. What is the plan, then? The Strategic Initiative document argued that rather than decline and close, we ought to use our real estate equity to borrow heavily (if necessary) to rebuild relevant programming in order to broaden our appeal while maintaining our values. See the introduction, above, for more on the three initiatives that LPCC chose to pursue.

Some Reflections Rooted in the Business Plan

1. Congregational Health.

In the business plan for Soul Table, LPCC argued that, “We are still a relatively healthy church.” That is less true today, although we are not facing an obvious crisis. Attendance has held roughly steady over the past three years—perhaps even increasing a little bit. But we have also seen our youth program die out, and our Sunday School program dwindle, reflections of an ever-aging congregation.

2. What Does the Future Hold for LPCC?

The business plan argued that, “In a large urban centre such as Toronto it is plausible that LPCC might draw enough people to our well-done, traditional 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. At a minimum, it will take superb marketing. LPCC is not doing that now, however, as there is no personnel or budget for it. It will take a huge and self-conscious commitment by current members to promote outreach to friends and neighbours to change course. It will take continual refreshing of Sunday programming, especially for our younger members. Whether this is possible is uncertain.”

Personally, I still believe this to be the case. But I also note that preliminary efforts to refresh and revitalize the morning service with art, drama, more instrumentation, more contemporary music, and liturgical changes did not bear fruit. The small committee that began meeting about these matters did not flourish, and the few attempts to enact some change, while appreciated, did not take root and flourish. What was the problem? A lack of leadership time and volunteer commitment. And with Soul Table happening, a lack of initiative and focus. Going forward (and with only one FT minister, at least for a while) these sorts of issues are only going to become more pressing.

3. All thriving churches are “hub” congregations rather than community congregations. I wrote about this in a blog post that received an incredible amount of traffic. (<http://faithisntwhatyouthink.blogspot.com/2019/11/have-been-to-half-dozen-denominational.html>)

The business plan stated that, “data suggests that the future of Lawrence Park Community Church is not, ironically, as a church that draws most of its attendees from Lawrence Park. A better way to think of LPCC’s catchment area is to think of an area south of Finch, West of the Donway, East of Bathurst, and North of St. Clair. Even so, LPCC can continue to expect perhaps twenty or more percent of its attendees to travel even longer distances, as is the case now. To survive, Lawrence Park Community Church must become a ‘hub,’ church, one with a city-wide reputation for being “United, Unlimited, and Unorthodox,” and all that entails.

“Who will come from within this larger catchment area? Younger single, living together, or married professionals as well as students. They will be attracted by the church’s liberal outlook on contemporary culture mores; its many opportunities to become engaged as volunteers both for church activities or social outreach; by its unique mix of meals/worship/secular music/after worship activities for members of all ages; the opportunity to worship on Sunday nights, after returning from cottage or skiing; by a uniquely gifted leader from their generation; by superior marketing to this target group; by accessibility to parking; by child care and children’s activities; by superior marketing, and by social media buzz.”

These observations were not in themselves necessarily all wrong. However, as Stephen Milton has pointed out, is also true that a large portion of these younger potential attendees at LPCC actually live “on line.” Are there—even in a city as large as Toronto—really enough people who would get into a car to come to our services because we have great advertising and decent speakers?

The jury is out, but I think everyone involved with Soul Table recognizes that there are all sorts of unexpected challenges here. There is the on-line world itself. There were unexpected subway line shutdowns. There were no after-Soul Table activities—the staff was just too tuckered out to think beyond the event itself. There was no child care, no children’s activities (a chicken and egg issue—we didn’t advertise availability, so kids didn’t come; but we didn’t have the child care anyway), no study groups, no wine and cheese gatherings.

4. The Financial Plan Funding for the new initiative came from the NMLDF fund, from LPCC itself, and was supposed to come from the new attendees to Soul Table. The congregation approved borrowing up to 1.25 million dollars as its contribution over ten years.

After Soul Table launched, several funding shifts took place. They were, in some ways subtle, but they also had a lasting impact. First, LPCC requested a ten-year NMLDF grant. It approved a three-year grant with the possibility of renewal. This injected a bit of long-term financial uncertainty into Soul Table, especially since the first 20 months of its funding was for launch expenses ranging from new hires of a media person the NMLDF grant. That meant that the actual window for launch success was very small when it came to justifying ongoing support from the NMLDF fund.

Perhaps more significant, however, was a change in the nature of LPCC’s congregational support for this initiative. It is important to remember that the congregation approved, and the church council, on several occasions, reiterated its financial support. However, a shift took place, such that this support was no longer conceived as an expenditure of up to 1.2 million dollars (front-loaded) over ten years via loans against property assets. Instead, the endowment fund was looked to for shorter term funding—as long as that money lasted. This too was generous. However, the truth is that the time line for Soul Table’s success was also shortened. Instead of ten years to

financial viability, it now had only two years or so to succeed. Of course, it isn't clear what would have happened if Soul Table continued on the numbers trajectory it was on when COVID shut it down, while falling short of its income projections. Perhaps the church would have, in this situation, sensed that patience was a great idea, and continued funding Soul Table. At the same time, the financial uncertainty was difficult for the leaders to juggle.

One take away from all this is that planting a new church—even in an existing building—is really, really expensive. And salaries are where the biggest expenses lie. United Church ministerial salaries are much higher than Evangelical church salaries, and inhibit spending choices on the ground. Professional salaries for event planning and media marketing are also very expensive in Toronto.

The financial plan in the Business Plan called for an average attendance of 60 people per Sunday by the end of year one, and we may have been on track for that (see statistics, which we will have to come up with). The plan also called for 14,000 dollars in donations by these attendees. They might well have achieved a good portion of this in that contributions to the cost of food lowered our expected outlay for that item in the budget. However, we received few donations just “for the program.” I believe that the 45,000 dollars we hoped for new attendees to contribute in 2020-2021 was too aspirational. Developing a community that has a sense of being responsible for its own costs is a long-term stewardship project.

5. Numbers. The benchmarks were pretty clear. After a year of meeting, Soul Table was supposed to reach a goal of sixty regular attendees. And after two years, that number was supposed to grow to 75. Finally, after ten years, each community within LPCC—morning and Soul Table was to have 150 weekly attendees, for 300 in total, a 300% increase over where we were in September of 2019.

It appears that Soul Table was on its way to meeting this target. But rather than a core group that attended, say, twice or three times a month, attendance tended to rely heavily on speakers bringing in their own audiences, and on a larger group of people who knew about Soul Table, but attended infrequently. We also almost always had a group of people who regularly worshipped in the morning join us for Soul Table. It is clear that those who did attend were not willing to make significant contributions to Soul Table's cost, however.

6. Risks & Mitigation. Business plans are supposed to imagine what the greatest risks to success are, and explain how such risks can be mitigated. Our business plan suggested that leadership woes, ballooning costs, and turning out a sizeable first crowd to build on were the three biggest risks.

As it turned out, I believe that we have excellent staff leadership for Soul Table in place. But we did not really develop excellent lay leadership, either from new attendees

or from within LPCC. I believe that the key problems here were that we have a volunteer burnout problem at LPCC (in spite of best intentions by our members) and we did not successfully recruit new attendees either. Part of the problem was that the staff was so busy juggling the daily grind of getting the next evening set that there seemed no time to recruit, nurture, encourage and meet with lay leadership.

Costs were contained to values that the original budget laid out.

And, turning out that first crowd went well. However, crowds waxed and waned depending on the speaker's profile. They grew when the speaker brought "groupies" along, or when the speaker was well known. They declined otherwise. The rest of the program did not work to sustain or grow the crowd.

Some Reflections Rooted in the NMDLF Application

The Goals of the initiative as described in the funding application were:

- **Grow a thriving second worship community in LPCC's building.**
- **Demonstrate the relevance of church-focused spirituality, action and community to a generation of people who have left or not considered church.**
- **Serve the UCC as a test-bed for adapting Evangelical church growth strategies to our liberal ethos.**

Appendix 2: Social Media and Geographical Origins

Online advertising and awareness was a major part of the Soul Table marketing and publicity strategy. Over six months, we developed a large email list, which received weekly alerts (350 people). We used Eventbrite to encourage people to RSVP, so we could have a sense of how many people were coming. We found in practice that this did not work very well, as actual attendance and RSVPs were only somewhat related. However, people browse Eventbrite for things to do, so we definitely picked up visitors who first learned about us on Eventbrite. The Eventbrite data also gave us an idea of where people lived (most of our visitors were from Toronto and Scarborough).

Thank you to Judi Pressman for compiling this data.

Email Database – 350 contacts

Facebook - 32 followers

Instagram – 94 followers

Meet-up – 168 members

Total Reservations made on Eventbrite – 1,099

Eventbrite Website – 491

Soul Table website and Social Media – 608

Total Page Views on Eventbrite – 7,725

Geographical Breakdown of Reservations from Eventbrite:

Toronto – 747

Montreal – 25

Thornhill – 11

Brampton – 9

Milton – 6

Ajax – 4

Oshawa – 3

Woodbridge – 2

St Catharines – 2

Richmond Hill – 2

North York – 2

Lisbon - 2

Nova Scotia – 2

Vaughan – 1

Scarborough – 71

Mississauga – 13

Markham – 10

Etobicoke – 8

Aurora – 5

Whitby – 3

Newmarket – 3

British Columbia – 3

Scottsdale - 2

Philadelphia - 2

Maple – 2

Burlington – 2

Accra - 2

Guelph – 1

Edmonton – 1

Appendix 3: Soul Table Attendance, September 2019- March 2020

This page shows the attendance for each night of Soul Table before the pandemic shut down in-person gatherings. The RSVPs refers to the number of people who RSVP'd through Eventbrite. The data then shows how many people actually came, how many had not attended LPCC before September, and how many were regulars at LPCC before September.

Date	Speaker	RSVP	Actual	New to LPCC	LPCC	Theme
2019	Neil Pasrichia	140	168	128	40	Soul
2019	Stephen Milton	14	34	20	14	Soul/Nature
2019	Rindy Bradshaw	41	65	42	23	Soul
2019	Stephen Milton	12	35	31	4	Soul
2019	Art Show					
2019	Micah Barnes	81	76	62	14	Social Justice
2019	Greta Vosper	36	89	68	21	Soul
2019	Stephen Milton	20	38	29	9	Soul
2019	Michel Chikwanine	65	81	45	36	Social Justice
2019	Sharly Chan	39	35	24	11	City
2019	Cancelled due to snow					
2019	Doctors and Guns	100	47	26	21	City/Social Justice
2019	John Suk	17	35	23	12	Soul

2019	Charlie Brown Christmas	110	84	66	18	Soul
2019	No Soul					
2019	Table					
2020	Stephen Milton	34	33	24	9	Soul/Nature
2020	Cathy Crowe	77	86	67	19	City
2020	John Suk	11	32	22	10	Soul
2020	Bruce Lourie	49	39	29	10	Nature
2020	Stephen Milton	23	44	33	11	Soul
2020	Sing A Long Karaoke	38	61	37	24	Soul
2020	Thin Places	19	32	26	6	Soul
2020	Refugee Border Crisis	20	48	33	15	Social Justice
2020	Toronto Zoo	15	24	17	7	Nature
2020	Finding Your Voice	17	41	26	15	Soul

Appendix 4: Attendance Online Only, March-April 2020

Once the pandemic made in person gatherings impossible, Soul Table returned online. The format was largely the same. Instead of a full band, we had one musician who performed pre-recorded music. We still had guest speakers, as well as our own ministers. The gatherings were hosted on Zoom, so we could preserve the opportunity for questions and answers. Due to financial considerations, we did not spend any money marketing these evenings on social media. We did send out email invites to our Soul Table email list.

The results were stark: virtually all of the newcomers who had attended Soul Table disappeared. The people who did attend were from LPCC, and usually the seniors. It appears that the people whom we had attracted to Soul Table with the promise of in-person community had no interest in online community. After seven weeks of attracting mostly LPCC people, we decided to shut down Soul Table. Its mandate was to bring in new people, and this format was not working.

Date	Speaker	RSVP'd	Actual	New to LPCC	LPCC	Theme
2020	Stephen Milton		26		26	Soul
2020	Grief Stories (Rob Quartly)		22		22	Soul
2020	Brain Fitness with Jill Hewlitt		28		28	Soul
2020	Stephen Milton		16		16	Soul
2020	How to Meditate		19		19	Soul
2020 (Mark Johnston)	Political Polarization		23		23	City/SJ
2020	Rachel Clark (Human Rights)		15		15	Social Justice

