

Approved Mission Articulation Plan - Cochrane Street United Church

October 1, 2022

Executive Summary

A Mission Articulation Plan (MAP) has been constructed at Cochrane Street United Church. All members of the Church community have had the opportunity to participate in the creation of it. Much input has been received, has been supportive of the Plan, and is incorporated in this final version of the document.

The Cochrane Street United Stewardship Analysis Report of March 22, 2021 called on us (p. 14) to “clarify and intentionally explore what is...(our) current sense of mission and ministry.” Our Minister and our Organist/Choir Director left employment with us in the summer of 2022. One era is ending and another beckons. The question we are grappling with is: “What does God call us to do as a congregation in the rest of the 2020s?”

We have achieved much in the last 25 years at Cochrane Street. The arrangement with First Light, the stabilizing of our finances, the sounding again of our incredible organ, the work of our Clergy, Organist and Volunteers, all have been inspired by and carried by the Holy Spirit. However, we face what appears to be an irrevocable decline in active participation in Church life by younger people who would need to be involved going forward.

We believe the next logical step in the United Communities of Faith Initiative is toward greater collaboration within the United Communities of Faith¹.

We plan to engage the other Pastoral Charges in the downtown (and possibly other St. John’s United Churches) with a view to potential partnership and cooperative management of some or all Pastoral Charges. If this were to happen, we see a more sustainable path forward, due to the sharing of resources and functions.

In this document we present our view as to where we sit and why. We will explain what the MAP is and who is on the MAP Committee. We will articulate a vision for the future of the church in an increasingly challenging environment.

1. What is our Mission?

We find and renew inspiration and energy to follow Jesus’ way of love and justice. We believe that we strengthen one another through God’s grace for a better world.

¹The United Communities of Faith is comprised of the United Churches in the northeast Avalon Peninsula. The churches voluntarily meet about 6 times a year to discuss matters and plan events of mutual interest among the member churches. Representation from the churches usually involves both congregation members and ministry.

2. What are we doing to achieve this mission?

We continue to gather in the sanctuary. Our services are also offered online through Jacobon Media. This has been valuable to those not of our congregation as well as our own church members. Some of the members of the congregation are part of a “phone tree” as a way to keep in touch with those who are no longer able to get to church.

We are supporting the United Communities of Faith initiative throughout St. John’s. We are a welcoming and inclusive community. In partnering with First Light, we are building a relationship with First Nations and so begin the process of reconciliation. This relationship must be actively expanded upon and grow in substance. This in combination with traditional worship will allow us to cultivate a more Christian spiritual path.

Music has been one of the fundamental parts of our faith and worship. We are fortunate to have the very best organ in the province in our sanctuary. As a place-bound instrument of such high quality, it offers to us a responsibility to maintain it and an opportunity to have it sound to its full capacity inside and outside of services, the latter as a form of outreach and community service.

Our services are focused on the family. We are grounded by the stories of the bible. We are rooted in a belief in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Our experience worshipping at the Seventh Day Adventist Church in 2016-2017 revealed to us tangibly that our congregation involves the sanctuary on Cochrane Street but is not dependent on it. Through this process the congregation demonstrated flexibility and adaptability which will be needed as we move toward potentially substantial changes in the structure and operation of our pastoral charge.

3. *Are these efforts being successful?*

We are one of four United Church Pastoral Charges in the downtown of St. John’s, the others being Gower Street, George Street, and Wesley United. There are two other United Churches in St. John’s (St. James, Cowan Heights) and one in Mount Pearl (First United).

We have a deep and esteemed legacy of over 130 years in the Methodist and United Churches. We are also far from immune to wider societal changes that have pulled people away from regular church attendance and involvement in Church activities. Baby Boom and subsequent generations of Canadians are much less likely to attend church services regularly and participate in church activities.

The establishment of Cochrane Centre was a forward-thinking and progressive plan to repurpose unutilized space in the building. Our subsequent arrangement with First Light has been a tremendous contribution toward addressing homelessness and other social problems in our community. It has been an initial step toward reconciliation with First Nations Peoples and offers promise for the future.

In addition to the 25-30 congregants who regularly attend services, we get an average of about 40 persons who access services online. We have members of the congregation who do not regularly attend but who serve on boards (eg. Bridges to Hope, Cochrane Centre) and contribute money to the church. We have a telephone tree that reaches members who are no longer able to attend services.

Our Choral Scholar program has given music students at MUN an opportunity to earn money, establish wider spiritual enlightenment and benefit from fellowship. Life-long friendships have been established and our services lifted through their gift of song.

Our fundraisers continue to be successful. Financial contributions are reasonably strong, and we have sufficient financial resources to maintain operations week to week.

Our congregation does face increasing challenges. Our volunteer support is under strain, as in:

- Leaders in key roles have been in these roles for a long time, and some of them have expressed a desire to move on
- Many of our volunteers have passed away over the past 20+ years
- Many of those who remain are getting up in years and will soon be unable to continue in these roles
- There are fewer persons of younger age who have stepped forward to take on these roles.

These social dynamics have created the following immediate challenges:

- There is no succession plan for the Board
- Some positions on the Board are vacant
- Sunday School is inactive
- The UCW and Time Out for Women are not active
- The Men's Club has formally disbanded, and some members have joined the Gower Street Men's Club
- Our Ushers are fully resourced but are facing challenges to continue
- Our Choir is still singing, and the numbers are good. They are increasingly reliant on our choral scholars and many members are up in age.
- Our Minister and Organist/Choir Director are left employment at Cochrane Street this past summer. Tristan Cleveland-Thompson is on a short-term contract currently as Organist
- Our average in-person attendance at services is low, averaging about thirty. This is a substantial and systemic decline
- Many people in St. John's assume we are a closed church

We believe that other Pastoral Charges in St. John's (particularly the other 3 Downtown churches) are finding similar issues as we are, to greater or lesser degrees.

4. *What do we want to achieve in the future?*

The trends detailed above have led to the establishment of this Mission Articulation Plan, "a way for a Pastoral Charge to map out its Mission and a plan to achieve that mission" (United Church Pastoral Charges Handbook MAP, p. 1). The members of the MAP Committee are:

- Heather McMaster
- Blair Bradbury
- Charlie Pope
- Tim Reynolds
- David A. Peters
- Rev. Ian March-MacCuish (United Church of Canada Representative)

This Committee recognises that it serves the congregation, and that its members do not carry the will of the congregation. It has come up with a series of interim recommendations that members feel are an appropriate and positive expression of our mission, given the reality of the situation we face.

We do not believe we should close the church outright and wind up the Pastoral Charge. However, we believe operating “Business as Usual” would INCREASE the risk of unilateral closure of the Pastoral Charge, due to our resource shortage.

5. How will we get there?

We do not believe we should continue as an isolated, independent Pastoral Charge. We need to take the next logical step in the United Communities of Faith Initiative, toward greater collaboration and possible partnered integration within the United Communities of Faith.

- We should proactively engage the other Pastoral Charges in the downtown (and possibly other St. John’s United Churches and churches in suburban communities) with a view to potential cooperative partnership between and joining of Pastoral Charges, or other forms of ministry that do not involve formal fusion of pastoral charges.
 - o A test case or term-trial partnership would be raised as a potential option
- When and if we find a partner(s), negotiate with them the sharing of resources and functions:
 - o Protecting at least regular and frequent services at Cochrane
 - o In a post-pandemic environment, continue to build back our church family activities, while welcoming a wider group of parishioners
 - o Renaming of the Pastoral Charge to maintain the identity of Cochrane Street United Church
 - o Shared Clergy, Administrative, and Organist/Choir Director resources across a multi-church Pastoral Charge
 - We are not convinced that it makes sense to hire a full time Minister and Organist for Cochrane Street-only services in late 2022 and forward
 - o We need at least some of the congregation to be willing to participate in the services and fellowship at the other church(es)
 - o Committees would operate across church lines, to allow folks to move on if they so desire
 - o Sharing the cost of some combination of Clergy, Organist, and Admin staff would save each of the formerly independent pastoral charges money, increasing our collective Mission capabilities
 - o Some form of cooperative partnership as discussed here will be newsworthy, helping to counter the false narrative that we are already closed

These discussions should proceed with the assistance of United Church of Canada staff before Minister and permanent Organist hiring decisions are made at the church, which is to say more or less immediately. Every Sunday we pray that God may “break through in new ways in our church.” We believe this MAP represents our best new way.

“Tremendous opportunities lie ahead, but they will take wisdom, compassion and courage to live out”

(Reverend Christopher White, Kedron United Church, Oshawa Ontario.
Broadview, June 2022)