



# CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL DISCERNMENT REPORT

SUBMITTED TO: Emmanuel United Church

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# DISCERNMENT REPORT

## Introduction

The following report outlines Emmanuel United Church's Strategic Priorities and Goals. The plan is drawn from the dreams and ideas generated by the congregation on April 14, 2024 in response to key questions the congregation held during a season of prayer. The congregation reviewed the plan on May 5, 2024. This document was updated following the May 5 congregational conversation – these comments are in blue. Please see Appendix A for Emmanuel's Strategic Priorities and Goals. Please see Appendix B for the questions held during the *Season of Prayer* and the congregation's responses to those questions.

## Renewal & Visioning Review

In fall 2024, Emmanuel contracted with Credence for support with a Renewal and Visioning Process. This Process has included:

- Six meetings with the Reference Group to plan and guide congregational engagement.
- Four sermons provided by Credence during worship [January 28, February 11, March 3, and April 14, 2024].
- Five facilitated conversations with the congregation that considered the following themes:
  - *Characteristics of Thriving Churches in an Age of Anxiety*,
  - Emmanuel's strengths, challenges, and visions for the future,
  - Introduction to the *Season of Prayer* and key questions Emmanuel is wrestling with,
  - Learning and insights from the *Season of Prayer*, and
  - Key emerging strategic priorities.

## Outcomes & Next Steps

On May 5, 2024, Emmanuel received a report outlining the five key strategic priorities discerned by the congregation: (a) nurture connection, (b) strengthen faith, (c) focus outreach, (c) right-size the structure, and (d) discern Emmanuel's future related to the building and finances (as seen in Appendices A and B). Emmanuel's priorities are best summarized by a phrase associated with one of its key commitments: *To be an outpost of God's grace*. Acting on the priorities involves several next steps, including empowering committees and establishing action groups to operationalize the commitments made by the congregation. Credence recommends that Emmanuel consider additional coaching for the congregation's leaders to support the congregation with acting on the commitments identified in the plan. *Emmanuel is at a crossroads. The congregation's priorities build on the energy and enthusiasm for nurturing connections and faith. In addition, the congregation is facing important, and life changing decisions related to its structure, building, and finances. Credence has seen many congregations shrink back from the commitments to act on their priorities because of uncertainty, exhaustion, and anxiety. Credence encourages Emmanuel to seize this opportunity. The energy in the congregation for being an outpost of God's grace is palpable and real. With the commitments Emmanuel has made, the congregation is poised to more fully become a place of healing and hope in the world.*

## Appendix A: Emmanuel Strategic Priorities and Goals

Priority 1: Nurturing Connection	Concrete Goals: What concrete goals will animate our priority?	Concrete Steps: What steps are needed to operationalize our concrete goals?	Details: Who does what by when?
<p><b>Priority 1:</b> To nurture deeper connection &amp; welcome at Emmanuel.</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> Because we know loneliness is an epidemic in our culture; because the quality of our welcome is a form of ministry &amp; outreach; because community matters.</p> <p><b>Anticipated Outcomes:</b> Connection is our gift. If we did this, we would be confident in our gift. Our confidence in connection would strengthen our gift and would lower our anxiety about what we cannot do.</p>	Define and organize small group ministry as an ongoing part of Emmanuel's identity.	Create an inventory to learn about skills and interests in the congregation to participate in and/or lead small groups.	•
	Plan gatherings over food for the congregation (potlucks, quarterly communion breakfasts).		•
	Meet regularly after church for "2 <sup>nd</sup> hour" conversations on various topics (spiritual or practical).	Consider teaching talking circle skills to support the congregation with small group conversations.	•
	Appoint greeters. Practice greater intentionality re: greeting people on Sundays.		•
<p>May 5 Comments: Emmanuel is fully in favour of this initiative. This initiative is regarded as important because Emmanuel can enhance its full inclusion of all people (seniors, newcomers, people of colour). This initiative allows those at Emmanuel to take care of one another which is also important. Some wonder about how Emmanuel can use technology to support community building and/or use a communication mechanism to inform one another about needs in the community.</p>			

Priority 2: Strengthening Faith	Concrete Goals: What concrete goals will animate our priority?	Concrete Steps: What steps are needed to operationalize our concrete goals?	Details: Who does what by when?
<p><b>Priority 2:</b> To grow in faith and the ability to talk about faith.</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> As a Christian community, this is our reason for being; we are more than a social community.</p> <p><b>Anticipated Outcomes:</b> We would feel more comfortable talking about our faith and hearing from others about their faith. It would help each person in their own spiritual life. We would become more understanding of one another and would more readily practice spiritual disciplines of love and grace for one another. We will grow in our faith.</p>	Nurture faith practices for families with children through various strategies (snail mail, Sunday School, nursery).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
	Define and organize small group ministry as an ongoing part of Emmanuel's identity.	Create an inventory to learn about skills and interests in the congregation to participate in and/or lead small groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
	Invite people's faith stories as a part of worship.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
	Strengthen the music ministry at Emmanuel.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p>May 5 Comments: Emmanuel is fully in favour of this initiative. Many small groups are already happening. How can Emmanuel better publicize these?</p>			

Priority 3: Focus Outreach	Concrete Goals: What concrete goals will animate our priority?	Concrete Steps: What steps are needed to operationalize our concrete goals?	Details: Who does what by when?
<p><b>Priority 3:</b> To consciously name ministry to people who are marginalized as the center of Emmanuel’s focus. This includes our ministry with Waterloo Wayside and Vera’s Place.</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> This reflects who we already are and establishing this focus creates a filter that will assist with our decision-making related to the remaining priorities.</p> <p><b>Anticipated Outcomes:</b> We will be known as an outpost of God’s grace.</p>	<p>Conversations about faith, community, structure, and building will be made with this focus as our identity.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
	<p>We will continue to be a place of warmth and welcome. We will create easy opportunities to connect with the congregation and with God for newcomers.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p>May 5 Comments: Thinking of Emmanuel as “an outpost of God’s grace” is correct – it fits who Emmanuel is. Filtering all decisions through this commitment will help Emmanuel to know what it needs to do to thrive.</p> <p>For some, Wayside feels too big for who Emmanuel is today. Some would like to let other organizations lead Wayside, while still making space for people from Emmanuel to volunteer for Wayside.</p>			

Priority 4: Right-size Structure	Concrete Goals: What concrete goals will animate our priority?	Concrete Steps: What steps are needed to operationalize our concrete goals?	Details: Who does what by when?
<p><b>Priority 4:</b> To right-size Emmanuel's structure.</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> There is a need for strengthened decision-making and clearer roles and responsibilities at Emmanuel; people at Emmanuel are calling for this.</p> <p><b>Anticipated Outcomes:</b> Emmanuel will be more flexible, adaptable, transparent, accountable, and nimble. Emmanuel's structure will help the congregation to live into its ministry priorities.</p>	<p>We want to build a structure that matches who we are as a congregation today – in size, personality, and energy.</p> <p>We will collaborate with and act on the structure recommendations of UCC's Regional representative.</p> <p>This priority will generate additional concrete goals and steps.</p> <p>This priority may require learning and training related to organizational leadership.</p>		
<p><b>May 5 Comments:</b> There is an urgent call for a revised structure though for some the structure is ok on paper. Most agree that an urgent challenge related to structure is communication between Emmanuel's lay leaders and the congregation. There is a desire for the structure to be right sized for who Emmanuel is today, and for the structure to be more inclusive of the congregation. The congregation is longing to be involved in key decisions related to Emmanuel.</p>			

Priority 5: Discern Emmanuel's Future Related to Building & Finances	Concrete Goals: What concrete goals will animate our priority?	Concrete Steps: What steps are needed to operationalize our concrete goals?	Details: Who does what by when?
<p><b>Priority 5:</b> To initiate a meaningful conversation regarding Emmanuel's future related to building and finances.</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> Emmanuel has limited financial resources creating urgency related to the building and finances.</p> <p><b>Anticipated Outcomes:</b> We will have a clear picture of where we are financially and a clear direction for our building.</p>	<p>Emmanuel will engage in an intentional stewardship campaign (not to be confused with a fundraising campaign) alongside narrative budgeting in order to strengthen the budget. This initiative will be led by a Stewardship Team.</p> <p>Alongside focused attention on Priorities 1 and 2 and the planned stewardship campaign, with a focus on the marginalized as our central purpose, Emmanuel will engage in a conversation regarding its future. Options for consideration include amalgamation, closure and dispersing resources according to Emmanuel's purpose, selling and moving, redevelopment, or selling a portion of the property (or another strategy) to stay in the building. This conversation is regarded as urgent given Emmanuel's financial picture. This initiative will be led by a Future Direction Team.</p>		
<p>May 5 Comments: Emmanuel's urgent and immediate concern is regarding finances and the future of the building. It is important for the whole congregation to be involved in conversations and decisions about the building and finances. Some offer that the building is too large for Emmanuel's current size and number of people. These voices want a meeting space that is right sized for who Emmanuel is today. Some wonder whether rental money from Wayside can help Emmanuel. Others offer that it is not right for Emmanuel to make money off Wayside. All agree that without a focus on Priorities 1, 2 and 3, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> priorities quickly exhaust the church – and, over time, without a solid focus on the first three priorities, the last two priorities will become irrelevant.</p>			

## Appendix B

### Emmanuel Season of Prayer: Key Questions

Remembering our strengths, challenges, questions, dreams and hopes while opening ourselves to God's direction: How are we being called today? How do we focus our energies??

- How can we address loneliness in our community & deepen our connection with one another?
- How do we grow in our faith? How do we learn to talk more easily about faith?
- How can we better focus our outreach, given the size we are today?
- How do we address challenges & questions related to our volunteer structure, finances, building, property, & future as a congregation?

### Dreams & Ideas

The following ideas are taken from the notes submitted by congregants following the April 14, 2024 congregational meeting.

- **General Ideas**
  - Acceptance & Letting God Lead
    - Accept who we are today. Stop lamenting who we were and focus on current reality.
    - Get out of God's way at Emmanuel. We do not know how God can work with Emmanuel. God is saying: United we stand, divided we fall. Accept instead of fight – go with the flow of God's vision. It is hard to praise God when you are in chaos – when you need prayer yourself. Emmanuel's struggle may be because Emmanuel is on the verge of a breakthrough. The congregation is capable of great things for God. We need to let go and let God lead. When God closes a door, God opens a window.
    - How do we let go of our egos so we can focus on what is best for Emmanuel? Saying "it's always been this way" is fear based.
    - We need to change now, not 5 years from now.
    - Why would we want to go back to what we used to be like? Nothing else in the world is the same, we have no more slide rules, no typewriters, not rotary phones, etc. Wisdom is in being open to change.
    - We need to give up "us and them" thinking – we are all humans with gifts to share. We need to see ourselves as partners on the journey – both inside and outside of Emmanuel.
    - We want to change our mindset to "let God in."
  - Amalgamation
    - We experienced awe and wonder during Holy Week services. We wonder whether its time to actively work toward amalgamation.
  - Taking Action
    - Ensure we implement our ideas rather than just thinking about them.
    - We know we need to do something – this takes courage.
    - Address our challenges together, not just a few people. We must have the courage to say that not everything gets decided by just a few people.
  - Emerging Fund
    - What happened to Emerging Fund? Was it amalgamated with Building Fund?



- Poverty
  - Poverty is not necessarily a lack of money. Poverty is also a lack of community & connectedness (but money is still necessary). Everyone needs a secure place to at least store their stuff safely even if they don't stay in the place all the time.
- How can we address loneliness in our community & deepen our connection with one another?
  - Small Groups
    - Continue/expand the small group experience (as we have through this process; also targeted groups like a men's group)
    - More small intentional groups, keep meeting as prayer groups, study groups, seniors groups, young families groups, etc.
  - Knowing Others
    - To support people getting to know one another, start a "special me" day or something like it.
    - Organize more socializing to get to know people better.
    - More social gatherings that are not fundraisers (dances, potlucks, games nights, picnics, bike/car rally, Guess who's coming to dinner)
    - Have cards available to sign each week for people to sign during coffee time, to be mailed after worship to those who need encouragement, support or in times of celebration.
    - Invite people in. Don't let people sit alone. We feel God's love at Emmanuel.
    - Support for engaging one another during coffee hour.
  - Using Technology
    - Use WhatsApp to send texts to congregants such as a Word of the Day.
    - Adjust to focus on reaching people in a manner that fits with the digital world. Just because people are not in the building does not mean they are not part of the community.
  - Seniors & Community
    - A special "seniors coordinator" is no longer necessary. We are capable of caring for all of the members of our community of faith without paying for an extra staff – it would save money and help reduce loneliness if members were the ones who cared for members (small groups & pastoral care team) – the minister would be needed for crisis care of members.
    - Another group sees the work BW provides with seniors as essential.
  - Mindset
    - We are all partners – we have to stop thinking we are the only ones doing anything!
- How do we grow in our faith? How do we learn to talk more easily about faith?
  - Sharing Faith & Prayer
    - Hear people's faith stories.
    - Continue small groups where we can talk about our faith. We want to continue in our small group.
    - Start a prayer list and share results of prayer.
    - Support with learning to talk about our / hear about others' faith experiences.
  - Worship & Music
    - More music at church.
    - Can WLU help us with our music?

- Worship in a circle not pews.
- How can we better focus our outreach, given the size we are today?
  - Dedication to Marginalized
    - Reach out to existing LGBTQ+ groups with information regarding regular youth activities.
    - Dedicate ourselves to being PIE (public, intentional, explicit) in reaching out and including all who are marginalized including but not limited to: 2SLGBTQ+, BIPOC, disabled, economically deprived, neurodiverse, etc.
  - Welcome Initiatives
    - Continue to welcome others into the building.
    - Adjust to focus on reaching people in a manner that fits with the digital world.
    - Prodigals at the Pub is growing.
    - Practice the outreach of noticing new people, old people, the lonely, those with personal issues, to celebrate people.
  - Wayside
    - Wayside becoming Incorporated will help address previous concerns about leaving. We can separate from Wayside.
    - Wayside could be anywhere – it doesn't need to be on Albert Street.
    - Wayside is important. Could Wayside be managed by the Working Center? Does Wayside need to be run by another organization that is bigger and has more resources?
    - Does Wayside take up too much of Minister's time?
    - The daycare that started at Emmanuel grew and grew out and away. Wayside may also be on the verge of growing out and away from Emmanuel (if not away from the building than away from dependence on Emmanuel). Our job is to start things and encourage them to grow up and out and then start another thing. We should be an incubator.
  - Outreach Opportunities
    - Match outreach to current size/the resources Emmanuel has today – but still continue outreach. Be prepared to discern what to keep, grow or give up.
    - Recognise interdependence of those serving and those served.
    - There are many ministry opportunities: Emmanuel does not need to be defined by Wayside.
    - How does our advocacy work (surveys, letter writing campaigns, local Indigenous efforts) fit with our vision for Emmanuel?
- How do we address challenges & questions related to our volunteer structure, finances, building, property, & future as a congregation?
  - General statements
    - Answers to first three questions will create direction for this question.
    - We need to reorganize to match current size.
    - As volunteers, we must do what we can and then not beat ourselves up for not doing more.
    - Not enough time to get to this question.
  - Building
    - Partner with others to share the building with them.
    - Consider affordable housing?
  - Church Leadership

- Only a few people on the Board making decisions for congregation – this doesn't feel right.
- There is inertia in church leadership. Things seem to be decided by a subset of the Board. We need to forget the politics and embrace the community, share power.
- Re: Structure
  - Begin a Worship/Christian Development Committee and Pastoral Care Committee and eliminate Session.
  - Change the Official Board to a smaller Council Structure.
  - Do we need a visiting minister? Could we use the money from that position to pay our senior minister?
- Re: Finances
  - We need to hear more about how we are doing financially. We need to be better informed.

## Observations

- Emmanuel has a remarkable spirit present in its community – a desire for prayer, an openness to God, and deep expressions of love and care for one another in the community. There is a deep joy in one another and a longing for even greater connection. Many people are energized and excited by the possibilities associated with responding to the first two questions that were held in prayer (related to community and prayer).
- The vibrancy related to the first two questions becomes different with the last two questions (outreach and building/finances).
- Emmanuel is interested in outreach but is limited by size and energy. There is an urgent need to “right-size” Emmanuel’s outreach. Emmanuel appears to be well placed to focus a portion of its outreach to newcomers to the congregation.
- There is a sense among some that the structure “binds” Emmanuel and keeps it from living vibrantly into its current reality. The structure, too, appears to be longing to be “right-sized” or remodelled to better fit who Emmanuel is today.
- The building is bigger than Emmanuel needs for worship. There are some who speak about partnering with others who can share Emmanuel’s space; there are some who want to amalgamate with another United Church.