

# St. John's United Church

Maritime Conservatory of the Performing Arts

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*Following Jesus.*

*Embracing Difference. Making a Difference*



*“Called to BE the Church...”*

**An Interim Report from the Transition Team  
to the Congregation of St. John’s United Church**

**September 21, 2016**

## **Transition Team Members**

Lesley Griffiths (Co-Chair)

Sean Foreman

Deidré Dacanay

Jeanne Manning Stright (Presbytery)

Martha Martin (Interim Minister)

Katherine Harman (Co-Chair)

Louisa Horne

Rod MacInnis

Rick Fullerton (Presbytery)

## 1. Introduction

This Interim Report from your Transition Team is meant to provide you with a summary of current findings and our reflections over the past year. With the sale of our church property completed in April 2016, our focus for many months now has been on the second goal of our Interim Ministry: “To confirm our future mission and direction as a vibrant United Church on peninsular Halifax”.<sup>1</sup>

We provide here what we know and have come to understand about St. John’s and our current thoughts on how we can move forward to achieve our remaining goals. Further details on our work and various activities can be found in the Appendices.

When Rev. Matthew Fillier addressed Maritime Conference in May this year, he challenged us all: rather than to “go to church”, to “BE” church. This idea rang true to us, as we have come to understand that much of St. John’s work happens beyond Sunday worship; away from any particular building, in the community – where we are called to BE the church.

St. John’s is fortunate (and to some extent ahead of the curve) in that we have been engaged since 2006 in discerning “who” we are as a faith community and what drives us to “BE” church. St. John’s has a reputation as a leader in social action and outreach, and as a church that provides strong mentorship to emerging young leaders. Although we closed our old, traditional church building at the end of 2008, we have continued to show vibrant leadership and a strong desire to breathe life into our worship, faith formation, social action and community relationships. We embrace change. We have passion to live out the full diversity of our Mission Statement and work to inspire positive change in our faith and wider communities.

At St. John’s, we have already learned the lesson that many churches (of all denominations) must increasingly face: being called to “BE” the church does not depend on pouring increasingly scarce resources into traditional bricks and mortar; rather, it depends on investing in people, internally and externally, to fulfill our mission and passion as agents of Christ’s love in our community.

Of course, we still need dedicated space to do this important work, but that space must respond to the functional needs of “Being church” as we now experience it and may be served best by sharing space rather than owning it.

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<sup>1</sup> As a reminder, our 3 broad goals for Interim Ministry are: (1) to reassess and resolve the options for use or sale of our church property; (2) to confirm our future mission and direction as a vibrant United Church on peninsula Halifax; and (3) to move forward to call a new full-time Principal Ordained Minister.

This Interim Report includes two primary sections: (1) about how we are being church that relates directly to our evolving mission and direction, and (2) our current thinking on the issue of a “home” for St. John’s. We conclude with a review of the remaining time-line and action items for our Interim Ministry, and perhaps most importantly, an open invitation for you to meet, consult, and discern with us the content of this Interim Report through the month of October.

But first, putting this report squarely in a faith context, part of Martha’s sermon from this past Sunday (September 18, 2016) is reproduced here, when she spoke about God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah:

In *Genesis 15:1-6*, God promises to bless Abraham and Sarah with children, even though they are old and Sarah is well beyond child bearing years. Sarah and Abraham were called by God to leave their families and all the comforts of home to travel to an unknown land. God promised them many times that they would have many descendants. Yet they still remained childless. Abraham hasn’t heard from God in a while, and finally questions God’s promise to him that he will be rewarded for his faithfulness. He’s done everything that God has asked of him, and still, the promise has not come true.

God isn’t angry with him. Instead, God takes him outside and shows him the stars. Just imagine what Abraham is feeling as God tells him that his descendants will number more than the stars. It would have been inconceivable. Especially to a man and woman in their later years. God has invoked the cosmos itself as an illustration of the promise. God doesn’t just restate the promise, but magnifies it.

This, said one commentator, the juncture where pragmatic realism and the magnitude of God’s promise meet, is faith. Faith is to recognize both my limitations and God’s calling to bring about a future I can’t possibly understand, and then to live in that tension, in that in-between. Some call it the now and the not yet. To believe in the promise and yet not have the foggiest notion of how this is going to come about.

Does this sound familiar to anyone?

Is that not what this faith community has been doing for the past 2 years? For the past 10 years? For the past 20, 40, 60, 80 years? Indeed, isn’t this what any faith community is called to do?

There are many words for this phenomenon, this in between time, this now and not yet time. Sometimes people of faith have used the metaphor of wandering in the wilderness to describe a time when things are uncertain, when it seems that they don’t know where they are going, referring to the biblical story of the Israelites who took 40 years after escaping from slavery in Egypt to reach the Promised Land.

In the Interim Ministry Network, this in between place is called The Neutral Zone. Put simply the Neutral Zone is described as “... an in-between time when the old is gone but when the new isn’t fully operational.” Nobody likes the Neutral Zone. It feels like nothing is happening in the Neutral Zone. And, the Neutral Zone can feel like it’s going on forever. But in fact, that’s when things are happening – relationships are being built, new ideas are being tested, new energies are bubbling up, and yes,

sometimes even old patterns and structures that haven't worked for years can be abandoned and free folks up to create new ones.

This too, is our call, as people of faith. To believe in the enormous possibility that God offers for the future, while in the meantime journeying in faith with the community. It's not an easy task. But we are not alone. Thanks Be to God.

## **2. What does working on our ability to BE church look like?**

We are not alone. Change is a constant. Faith and passion will always overcome fear, anxiety and conflict. These are some of the lessons St. John's has already learned over the last 10 years (and more) and that we continue to embrace.

Your Transition Team meets every two weeks (except the month of August), and faith formation is an integral part of every meeting we have. Martha leads us through an exercise of "spiritual nourishment", which recognizes that successfully completing a period of interim ministry is a collective process of "discernment". We are not a "Board of Directors" simply collecting rational facts and making a best-case business decision, to ensure the future direction of the church. Instead, we have come to know that interim ministry requires us to be brave, to have faith, to ask difficult questions, to let go when required and to change how we do things regardless of the past (or fears about the future); to really understand "who" we are, and "how" we want to BE church.

We have considered the question governance at St. John's (how we make and implement decisions), and how committees and other small groups relate to each other and the wider church. The operations of a church need to support its work, and we have found that this part of St. John's is certainly in need of some attention. Although it is possible that a new governance structure could assist us in our collective decision-making and our internal relationships, our current focus needs to be placed on strengthening the collective life and work of the church; so we feel that now is not the time to divert precious energy and resources to redesign our internal governance.

That being said, with sale of the old property progress has been made in such areas as financial reporting (to be fully realized by the time of the next Annual Meeting), and there are more people attending Official Board and Session meetings. Also, as part of Martha's Interim Ministry work, she is helping us to develop stronger skills in conflict management and lay leadership, which are essential for a healthy church.

Our commitment to strong faith formation and Sunday worship remains firm. Music provides key spiritual nourishment for many. St. John's is also passionate

about our work outside of Sunday morning service. This will be apparent at the September 25<sup>th</sup> service when, in a “parade of dreams”, representatives from various groups (e.g., Bible study, Outreach, Book Club, Refugee Group, and a new group focused on the recommendations of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission) will share their passion with the congregation and invite new participation.

In addition to these existing groups, we have heard through our workshops lots of great ideas from many of you of possible new initiatives to strengthen our faith formation, social action and community relationships. We have more work to do to breathe life into these new “passions”. To facilitate this process, we created a form (see the Appendices for the Small Group Gatherings detail sheet) and ask that you continue to complete and submit them to a member of Session so we can keep track, promote and support new ideas.

It has been noted frequently that a large number of people from St. John’s have gone to ordered ministry. To better understand this phenomenon, focus group discussions were held with individuals who have been or whose membership still resides at St. John’s and who have undertaken (in the process or complete) discernment, study and entered ordered ministry (see the Appendices for the full results). The strongest finding was how supportive the congregation was to them. Participants spoke passionately about how St. John’s helped them explore the life that they were considering: e.g. “So affirmed by St. John’s and lifted up by St. John’s and I just continued to get the right kind of nourishment from them” (p.3).

Participants felt they could explore their faith and discuss their struggles in a safe place. They talked about being engaged in meaningful parts of church life. And they found that there is a balance at St. John’s between taking worship seriously, but not so rigidly as to make it uncomfortable when learning how to lead activities that would become key elements of a minister’s life. They also urged St. John’s to continue to nurture and develop youth programs.

All the findings led to the conclusion that we have an effective mentoring environment, and a strong foundation from which to continue to build and facilitate faith formation for all.

In a study by Stokes and Marler (2015) they learned that the most effective mentoring congregations work in the middle...somewhere between ‘enough’ and ‘just enough’, providing an edgy dynamic that attracts learners and leaders. They offered suggestions to create and/or maintain this for those aspiring towards ordered ministry such as, intentionally fostering the unique and influential role of

laity, providing many and varied opportunities to participate in pastoral ministry, recognizing and celebrating steps that are achieved by discerners along their journey and looking carefully for ways to close the gap between clergy and laity.

Although we are doing some of these things already, such as the “Worship Leadership” workshop, and plan to resurrect the “Experiment in Practical Christianity” program, there may be other small group possibilities to continue this internal work as part of our broader desire to facilitate meaningful faith formation and social action for all.

What do we know for sure? Investing in “people” is a key component of how we can and want to “BE” church. We have more work to do collectively and we look forward to working with Martha and the entire congregation as we continue to move forward.

### **3. Where can we “BE” church: a “new home” for St. John’s?**

Since January 2009, at the time the old church building was closed, St. John’s has worshipped at the Maritime Conservatory of Performing Arts. Administrative functions, storage and small meeting spaces were run out of “Church House” on Willow Street. With the sale of the church property at the end of April 2016, all church operations moved to the Conservatory. In addition, we have partnered with other churches and groups as needed to use shared space for specific functions (such as a church dinner, larger workshop, or other gathering).

In exploring the broad topic of the viability of a “new home” for St. John’s, your Transition Team has engaged in a robust examination with an open mind. We revisited the earlier work completed by St. John’s in looking at available options.

In summary, the full spectrum of options goes from disbanding as a congregation, to rebuilding or purchasing our own church property, to rental or shared space options with others, to formal amalgamation with another UCC congregation.

Our discernment of both our mission and direction in “Being church” and the range of viable options at this time resulted in the following conclusions, guiding our on-going study and work in this area:

1. Disbanding is not an option; we know that we want to continue as a faith community of the UCC. St. John’s is a vibrant, well-established, affirming congregation with strong roots on peninsular Halifax;

2. Redevelopment is not an option, in any form: we made the right decision to sell our old property and invest the proceeds; we no longer have the vision or wish to spend our energy and focus on building our “own” new or redeveloped church building, either with or as a developer;
3. Shared space is something we have embraced for seven years since closure of the old building, and although not perfect, has many advantages and should be the focus of our on-going work;
4. Amalgamation may be an option worth exploring, but the Transition Team has not engaged in this up until now. In the event our discernment shows that other options revolving around shared space are not deemed sufficient or viable for the congregation, then formal amalgamation should be explored.

We know that some members long for better, dedicated space for St. John’s, as we used to enjoy when we had our own sanctuary, kitchen and church hall space. We believe that most members enjoy worship at the Conservatory on Sunday mornings with its bright natural light and great acoustics, but we know it takes a dedicated team of volunteers and energy to set up (and take down) church on a weekly basis.

We also know that without ready access to a large kitchen and dedicated space for programming and fellowship it interferes with some of our needs to BE church.

In a perfect world, we would have both the financial resources and the availability of modern, accessible, environmentally friendly, flexible space for rent or purchase in our preferred area of Halifax peninsula, so we can BE church in our own space.

However, this is not a realistic or viable option. With the assistance of some professional advisors, and our own independent research, we have explored again the rental and purchase market beyond the Conservatory for properties on the peninsula as a “home” for St. John’s. A “stand-alone” solution for us to buy or rent our own dedicated space, particularly when compared against shared space opportunities, does not exist.

Although we have effectively \$1 million invested following the sale of our property, this amount does not come close to providing sufficient equity to purchase another existing building, without placing the focus on significant debt financing and renovations (placing us again under the yoke of significant expenses, debt and the liabilities of property ownership).

Rental space in a commercial setting (such as an office building, large institution, etc.) that would provide both dedicated space for worship and administration, a sufficient kitchen and large space for social gatherings/fellowship is not readily

available or affordable. In fact, our research indicates that the costs of this type of space (all of which would require some form of “redevelopment” in the form of leasehold improvements) would be up to triple the cost of our current lease arrangements with the Conservatory.<sup>2</sup>

### Shared Space Is Our Future

Your Transition Team does not have the “final” answer or recommendation for purposes of this Interim Report: but, we strongly believe that “shared space” options are the future for St. John’s. Therefore, shared space is our focus.

We have a strong relationship with the Conservatory that continues to hold further possibility. We have a stable lease structure in place with predictable costs for the medium term and a mutual notice period for changes that may be required. We remain in discussion with the Conservatory leadership to explore further enhancements to our current space and activities, as the Conservatory itself moves forward with its own plans for change and renewal. Every relationship has its challenges. We see none that cannot be overcome with grace and good communication.

In addition, we have reached out specifically to 18 peninsular churches to have discussion on shared space and other possible opportunities. We have met with representatives from churches, the municipality, and broader non-profit groups to engage in discussions of current challenges and possible options for shared existing or redeveloped space.

There are a number of positive redevelopments planned or in their infancy across peninsular Halifax that may present some future shared-space opportunities attractive to St. John’s, which are premature at this time.

One concept discussed at some length with the Universalist Unitarian Church, which is engaged in a similar discernment process on its own future, is the concept of what has been called a “Spiritual HUB”, where a number of churches/groups join together to develop a modern yet affordable shared and flexible space for worship, office space, social gatherings and fellowship. No single church or group would need stand-alone space of that size for its own needs, seven days a week. Joining

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<sup>2</sup> The triple cost estimate for commercial rental space (that includes rent, occupancy taxes, utilities, common area fees, and leasehold improvements is based on only 4,000 sq. ft. of dedicated space (as compared to the past recommendation of 11,000 sq. ft. of space by the Implementation Team to accommodate all desired activities of the church within a redeveloped Spirit Place).

forces to create a “Spiritual HUB” is one potential future option that may be worth exploring.

All such options are premature at this current time, and will not happen in the short term. Such concepts also require the building of strong relationships, which also take time and commitment.

As such, under all circumstances, your Transition Team intends to continue further specific discussions with the leadership at the Conservatory to fine-tune and enhance our shared-space relationship and opportunities, with the ultimate goal of confirming a longer-term leasehold relationship.

In closing, a brief comment regarding amalgamation. We have explained above that amalgamation is not currently under consideration. We have not specifically discussed amalgamation as a desired option with other UCC congregations. Just to be clear, shared space opportunities with another church would not equal amalgamation.

We strongly believe, at this point in time, that our collective discernment is leading us to complete discussions with the Conservatory to do what is possible to enhance our shared space relationship with them for a longer term. We believe we can and should do this, to provide a level of stability and enable the work we need and want to focus on in “Being church” and living out our vibrant mission.

Our recommendation is to keep our “eyes and ears” open to other interesting shared space opportunities that will arise over the coming years in Halifax. In fact we would like to create some congregational action groups that engage with some of the communities that we have identified.

If this path is discerned not to be the right path for St. John’s, then there is one that remains, which would provide the greatest level of long-term certainty – to examine the issue of amalgamation. You must let us know which way we will go.

#### **4. Remaining steps and timeline for completing Interim Ministry**

Our period of Interim Ministry is currently scheduled to end when Martha has served us for two years: August 15, 2015 to August 14, 2017. Both Halifax Presbytery and the Maritime Conference Interim Ministry Committee provide oversight throughout the process, pursuant to the rules for Interim Ministry contained within the Manual (2013) and outlined in the Interim Ministry Policy & Procedures Handbook (2012).

These various policies require a 5-month “disengagement phase” leading to the end of the term and the post-interim period, in which the Transition Team completes a final review and report of the work completed to achieve the goals set for Interim Ministry.<sup>3</sup>

Our current intention is to complete our collective discernment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> goal in time for approval at the Annual Meeting (currently scheduled for March 5, 2017). The next five months are critical for the Transition Team to determine if the congregation has completed “sufficient work” on its goals for Interim Ministry, in particular its future mission and direction, so that we can recommend to the Official Board and Presbytery that we enter the disengagement phase and strike a Joint Needs Assessment Committee (JNAC) in preparation for a call or appointment for the post-interim period.

If we do not have that confidence, there is provision to request an extension of the period of Interim Ministry by 6 or 12 months from Presbytery. Any such decision would need to be taken by the end of 2016 and would be based on feedback received from the congregation.

#### **5. Invitation to Congregation: Consultation & Discernment – October 2016**

**We want to connect with you!** This Report will be circulated electronically to the congregation after being presented to the Official Board meeting on September 21, 2016, with paper copies available in church each week starting Sunday September 25, 2016. To ensure that we can speak to and consult with as many individuals and groups as possible, members of the Transition Team will be available before church, every Sunday through October, starting at 9:45 a.m., to review this Interim Report and seek whatever feedback you wish to provide.

If you cannot attend one of these sessions on the five Sunday’s through October, then please contact us so we can arrange an alternative date or venue; we can even come to you, or your group! We look forward to speaking/meeting with you soon!

With Blessings,

Transition Team,  
St. John’s United Church.

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<sup>3</sup> So there are no surprises in 2017, we remind you that Section I: 1.7.7 of the Manual dictates that the Interim Minister, on completion of the period of Interim Ministry, is prohibited from serving the congregation in any further call, settlement or appointment.

### Appendix A: A Brief Chronology of the Transition Team's Work

The following chronology is not intended to be exhaustive (or exhausting) but rather to provide a flavor of the type of work the Transition Team – with the help of many others – has been carrying out on behalf of St John's.

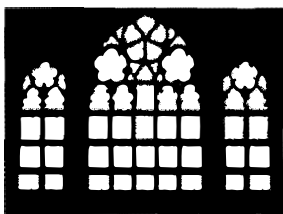
2014	November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Official Board accepted a recommendation from the Halifax Presbytery Pastoral Relations Committee that, rather than carry out a Joint Needs Assessment at this time, SJUC should appoint a Transition Team to guide the process of finding and working with an Interim Minister.</li> </ul>
	December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Transition Team is appointed. The original members are Deidré Dacaney, Lesley Griffiths, Louisa Horne, Katherine Harman, Sean Foreman.</li> <li>The Pastoral Relations Committee also appointed Rev. Jeanne Manning-Stright and Margaret Machum.</li> <li>Our mandate from Official Board is to explore options for our future as a Congregation, discern our mission, and determine our future direction.</li> </ul>
2015	January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Transition Team holds its first meeting. Lesley and Katherine agree to co-chair the Team. We work on developing a position description for an Interim Minister.</li> </ul>
	February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Transition Team and its work are blessed at the February 8 service.</li> <li>The Interim Minister position is posted.</li> <li>Rod MacInnis offers to join the Transition Team and is appointed by the Official Board.</li> <li>We work on interview questions and evaluation criteria.</li> </ul>
	March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deadline for applications.</li> </ul>
	April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The applications are screened and three people invited to be interviewed. The interviews are conducted over two days towards the end of the month.</li> </ul>
	May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Team reviews the interview results and makes a decision by consensus on the preferred candidate.</li> </ul>
	June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Team recommends the appointment of Martha Martin as Interim Minister to Official Board. The Official Board accepts the recommendation and an announcement is made to the Congregation on June</li> </ul>

		7, subject to Presbytery approval. Presbytery approved Martha's position with a 2-year term from August 15, 2015 to August 14, 2017.
	July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team begins process of determining what would happen if the church building on Windsor and Willow is put up for sale.</li> <li>• Martha begins work as our new Interim Minister.</li> </ul>
	August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition Team's first "summer retreat" in Sambro.</li> </ul>
	September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Transition Team and the Trustees present the results of their work, examining the pros and cons of selling the building, to Official Board, recommending that the property be sold, and how this should take place. Official Board ratifies the recommendation and later in the month, the Congregation does the same.</li> <li>• Martha's covenanting service is held on September 20, with a sermon by Dr Ross Bartlett.</li> <li>• Margaret Machum resigns from the Team, due to other commitments.</li> <li>• Martha attends her first Interim Ministry training course in Ontario.</li> </ul>
	October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The October 25 service was dedicated to discussions within the Congregation to help prepare for the November workshop with Paul Hutchinson – what brought you to St John's, why are you still here, and what is your hope for our future together.</li> <li>• Martha's Achilles tendon ruptures, setting in motion some challenges for us all.</li> </ul>
	November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paul Hutchinson, former Leader of the Corrymeela community in N. Ireland preached at the Nov 1 service and then led a workshop "Preparing for the Journey", attended by 50 members of St John's. His theme? "There will be disagreements on our journey, how will we face conflicts openly, honestly and constructively?"</li> <li>• A follow-up congregational discussion was held n November 27. This time the question was "How do you know when you are welcome?"</li> <li>• The feedback from the two congregational discussions is analyzed. A strong theme is optimism for the future and a desire and commitment to stay together as a congregation.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rick Fullerton joins the Transition Team as the second Presbytery representative.</li> </ul>
	December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The church property is listed for sale on Dec 1.</li> <li>• Transition Team starts planning research steps and possible conversations with other faith communities or organizations.</li> <li>• A prayer space is organized before the Advent services.</li> </ul>
2016	January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Visioning subcommittee continued to work with the congregational feedback, while the Property subcommittee completed its work, handing the reins over to the Trustees.</li> <li>• The Team reads the book “Holy Currencies” by Eric Law – money isn’t the only currency. The other five, according to the author, are time and place, gracious leadership, relationship, truth, and wellness.</li> <li>• On January 31 the Team leads a Sunday discussion on “How are we called to be disciples?”</li> </ul>
	February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning Paul Hutchinson’s second visit.</li> <li>• St John’s receives a conditional offer for the church building.</li> </ul>
	March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sale of the church building was confirmed with a closing date at the end of April.</li> </ul>
	April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paul led a workshop for St John’s on April 2, attended by about 40 people. The theme this time was “Walking in New Fields” and the highlight was the process of filling out our “Passion Pages” – what idea makes us personally excited, and what are we prepared to do to make the idea come to life.</li> <li>• Paul also preached the next day.</li> </ul>
	May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team led the May 1 service. Based on 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, small groups were asked to discuss and then make a personal pledge on the theme “I will try to embody love by....”</li> </ul>
	June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Team reaches out to a long list of spiritual communities in the central peninsula area (all faiths) inviting them to consider “creative conversation about potential collaboration”.</li> </ul>
	July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Martha attended the second Interim Ministry training session in Chicago. Through the summer months, Team members hold meetings with a number of faith communities and organizations to identify possible collaborative opportunities.</li> </ul>

	August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Team holds its second “summer retreat” in East Pennant.</li> <li>• Martha and Lesley from the Team, together with Jim Sharpe and Pat Brennan-Alpert, attend the Peace and Friendship Gathering at Tatamagouche.</li> <li>• Martha develops her fieldwork project as part of her Interim Ministry training.</li> <li>• We have a discussion with Heather Star Williams, Brunswick Street United Church.</li> </ul>
	September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We enjoy an interesting lunch meeting hosted by the Universalist Unitarian Church.</li> <li>• Team completes its Interim Report for the Congregation &amp; Presbytery.</li> </ul>

## Appendix B



# St. John's United Church

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## Small group gatherings

Interested in starting a small group meeting at St. John's? Please provide some details which will allow us to support the group.

Name of the group:

Purpose of the group:

Contact person:

- The group would be consistent with our mission statement:

*Following Jesus. Embracing Difference. Making a Difference*

How many members anticipated?

- Fewer than 10  
 10-20  
 More than 20

What resources would the group require? Please provide details as able.

- Meeting space  
 Support from staff  
 Other

How will this group contribute to building our church community?

- Strengthen relationships within the church  
 Strengthen relationships with our neighbours/ larger community/ United Church community  
 Develops leadership within the church  
 Contribute to the wellness of St. John's & our greater community  
 Other, please describe.

Please provide any other details to be considered. Email to [stjohnsunited@eastlink.ca](mailto:stjohnsunited@eastlink.ca)

## **Appendix C: Focus Group Study**

“Oh, this is the place I’m supposed to be”: a focus group study of the role of St. John’s congregation in discernment to a call to ordered ministry”

### **Introduction:**

Although there is an extensive literature that explores the “call” to ordered ministry, the role of a congregation in the lives of individuals discerning their call is poorly understood. A focus group study of members and former members of St. John’s United Church, Halifax was undertaken to better understand the role, if any, of St. John’s in their journey towards ordered ministry.

### **Background:**

St. John’s United Church is a vibrant, well-established, affirming congregation with strong roots in peninsular Halifax.<sup>1</sup> It has a long history of involvement in social justice issues, a diverse music and worship program, a commitment to faith formation and continuing education, and a creative and connected congregation that has an ability to dream, to take measured risks and navigate change.

For the past 10 years, St. John’s has been engaged in a continuous process of discerning its future mission and home on peninsular Halifax. This included a focused pursuit of the redevelopment of the church property, which was to be called “SPIRIT Place”, a purpose-built church facility to support the future mission and worship built with an affirming independent living complex for seniors.

Unfortunately, after six years of extensive community engagement, St. John’s was unable to gain necessary support and was refused final planning approval from Halifax Council. In the fall of 2014, St. John’s made the difficult decision to end further efforts to take SPIRIT Place from dream to reality. At the same time, the minister of nine years confirmed a new call to ministry.

At the suggestion of Halifax Presbytery, St. John’s agreed that a defined period of intentional Interim Ministry would benefit the congregation. In the spring of 2016, the church property was sold. The next focus of transition is to confirm our future mission and direction as a vibrant United Church on peninsular Halifax. Work continues with many activities including looking inward as well as externally to local communities. During this process, it has been repeatedly observed that there has been an unusually large number of St. John’s congregants over many years who discern a call to ordered ministry, study and ultimately become leaders in faith communities. In fact, at Maritime Conference this year (2016) we witnessed the ordination of two congregants and a Supervised Field Placement Student (M.Div) whose learning site was St. John’s.

As part of an effort to better understand St. John’s, two focus group discussions were held with individuals who have been or whose membership still resides at St. John’s and who have undertaken (in the process or complete) discernment, study and entered ordered ministry. The purpose of this study was to learn from these individuals the role, if any, of St. John’s in their journey.

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<sup>1</sup> some of the following has been taken from the Position Description that the Transition Team created and posted for the Interim Minister position, and has been re-used with permission

## Methods:

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board, Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, NS. Seven people were recruited by direct invitation and word-of-mouth. Two individuals are now retired from the order of ministry and five were at different places on the journey towards ordered ministry in the United Church of Canada. Two separate group discussions occurred within one month of each other, with three people attending the first one, and four the second. All participants first read and signed an informed consent form, and also in the second session consented to an additional researcher to be present to assist in recording the discussion. To allow quotations to be included in the final report, explicit consent was obtained from all participants. Each session lasted approximately two hours.

The focus groups had three parts: Each participant spoke about the initiation of their discernment, and the journey that followed. The next part was a facilitated discussion using the following research questions:

What was your experience of being in our congregation and initiating the journey of discernment?

What, if any, was the role of St. John's in the beginning of the journey? As it unfolded?

What can we learn about the congregation and the church from this, in particular in regards to knowing who we are and what work we do?

To conclude, the researcher asked participants for their wisdom in regards to how their experiences might inform St. John's about their identity and future.

## Analysis:

The recordings were transcribed *verbatim* and uploaded into QSR NVivo™ software for analysis. A thematic analysis of each participant's narrative and the facilitated discussions explored similarities and differences among them. Four dominant themes and the participants' wisdom and advice are presented in the findings below, participants are referred to only by number (P1-P7).

## Findings:

### 1. Early exposure to church

All participants described how their exposure to church as children (three of the participants had "grown up at St. John's"), mostly the United Church, but some had other faith backgrounds. The positive impact of Sunday School was also mentioned, where they had fun and also learned important, faith-based lessons that they carried with them into adulthood. They spoke of the impact of attending church in their teen years, having a social connection with other youth and also having made lasting friendships.

### 2. Meaningful contributions

A resonating theme emerged through comments of the importance of being recognized as having the ability to make meaningful contributions to church life. Every participant described how affirming it was for them to be identified and asked to take on roles in the church life that they perceived to be important. For example, two participants were elected to be youth elders at St. John's, which required them to visit members in their homes. They spoke of how valued it made them feel to be doing work that previously had been assigned only to established, trusted members

of the congregation. Others spoke of being given the responsibility as part of family worship to plan and deliver a Sunday program, lead worship when the minister was on leave, represent St. John's at Maritime Conference, take on new programming, lead Bible study, write prayers....there were many examples.

### 3. The Call

St. John's leaders had a significant impact on the participants' pathway to ordered ministry. These leaders were not only ministers (although they played a very strong role), but other staff and lay leaders in the church as well. Participants spoke of being asked directly by a minister if they were "being called" to be a United Church minister. "I think I hear a call to ministry from you. Have you ever thought about that?" (P6) And, because several participants stated that they had never given it serious thought before being asked directly, they also made the point of how important it was that there were repeated inquiries when they did not respond positively or make steps to initiate the process. There was agreement among the participants that this persistence was a force that helped them move more quickly into the process. As, although they were sure at the point of the focus group study, when they were only just giving the idea first consideration, they were not certain at all. It seemed particularly important that this inquiry came from a minister and participants described that they felt the minister understood where they were "(the minister) *knew* who I was and (they) approached me with direct questions". (P3)

Not all participants had this direct interaction, and described a slow journey that took many years. One participant, although deeply involved in church activities and with leadership roles stated "people assumed that I'd be a minister, and I ran as far as I could the other way from it." (P7) and then many years later had a "radical moving experience" that ultimately led to discernment.

And although not every participant was asked directly by someone to spur on their deliberation, most spoke about how, when they did make the decision, their ministers and others around them were not surprised. It was as though they were behaving in such a way that others believed they had already decided. "Yeah, when I finally said it out loud to them, they said 'finally!'" (P5)

### 4. Safe and supportive.

The support participants experienced at St. John's was possibly the strongest finding. "it's a package"(P4) Aside from receiving mentorship from their current minister, the five participants who were most recently going through the process felt supported by the congregation. Among other things, it was quite important that they felt it was safe to discuss their faith and beliefs openly. When an individual is considering entering the ministry, they are exploring themselves and their inner purpose as well as a new vocation that might include leading a congregation like the one they are in. That is why the *Meaningful Contribution* theme described above is so critical. While an individual is considering these things, there is a need to experience them in a safe way and also measure success in terms of how it fits their needs as well as the needs of the congregation. There are also the subtler aspects of ministry that are nurtured at St. John's... how we form relationships.

"while I was (at St. John's) there was always something very, very unique about it... having this grace in terms of being able to define and develop relationships, spiritual, pastoral, in and of themselves within the community" (P4)

Participants spoke passionately about how St. John's helped them explore the life that they were considering.

"So affirmed by St. John's and lifted up by St. John's and I just continued to get the right kind of nourishment from them" (P3)

"Oh, this is the place I'm supposed to be" (P3)

"this is where I'm supposed to be" (P5)

"the vibe that nobody ever minded me trying things... (I was) encouraged to just try different leadership roles (writing prayers, reading scripture, teaching Sunday School, leading Bible study) ... nobody ever minded when I screwed up... if your heart is in the right place, people don't get too fussed." (P6)

"feeling really welcome there, feeling incredibly safe there, knowing that there is a place where my children belong" (P3)

It was not so easy to explain *how* St. John's does it, but the participants used words like: "genuine" "authentic" "unconditional support". Participants described having found St. John's and *knowing* it was the right place because:

**It operates through a ministry of all people.**

"I would chalk it up more to a lack of preciousness, like there's an informality but, still everyone takes it seriously, the service of worship is not being treated as being so precious that only those who are qualified are allowed to have hand in it. ... it is the attitude at St. John's toward worship really is the work of the people" (P6)

"what makes St. John's special to me, is that higher Christology, that focus on Christ, that turns us outward, I think also reduces the kind of egotistical stakes so that people don't have the same attachment to their role in the church as being 'mine' or being threatened when somebody new is doing leadership... The clergy that was always inviting people to join in ministry and there was never any competition ... they never seemed threatened by other clergy who were guests, or at different functions that we would be at with other clergy. Not that things were always perfect and there's a lot of different personalities but I think that's one of the things that shines about St. John's, is people not getting really territorial, cause certainly doing my internship and field education and pulpit supply at other churches; sometimes a job belongs to one person in the church, and they inherited through family and they're very bad at it, but you cannot move them to something else, without it being a huge meltdown, so not having that kind of attachment to role."(P6)

"the environment (at St. John's) fosters a desire to know more and to go deeper" (P7)

**Was clearly welcoming before becoming an Affirming church**

Speaking about a children's story time using "And Tango Makes Three" (a book about two male penguins bringing up a baby penguin)... "it wasn't so much that (the minister) was doing that story, it was that the congregation felt it as normal, there was no great sigh around the room or, averted eyes or, and so I felt called to that and started attending St. John's" (P4)

## **The natural intergenerational community**

“it was like a sense of family at St. John’s ... I felt like I gained all of these grandparents as well as aunts and uncles... because people were really warm and encouraging.” (P6)

“I vividly remember the first time I walked through the side doors and there was something about it that felt like home, more than the other churches did. And, my mum had to go off and help with the service. A girl a little younger than me was standing in the coat rack room, just off to the side there, and just looked at me and took my hand and said “we’re gonna be friends now”. And that was kind of it for me and I always loved going to St. John’s ... my mum often said she never had to force me to get up on Sunday morning cause I was always up already and excited to go to see my friends.” (P5)

“there were hardworking, honest, blue collar folks part of St. John’s, and not that they aren’t in all of our churches but, there was a real sense there that you could just be who you were and yet still, faith and being committed to it was very important, and that made a huge impression on me during my student years” (P7)

### 5. Wisdom and advice:

Finally, the following are some additional thoughts from the discussion that are directed at St. John’s.

- Participants reflected on the importance of their experiences as youth in the church and urged St. John’s to continue to nurture and develop youth programs. There was interest in the idea of youth elder program, for example.
- St. John’s progressive nature is part of its uniqueness, participants encourage St. John’s to continue to try new things, explore new avenues.
- When looking for our next minister... participants suggested that the search committee question candidates about their theology, to make sure it matches St. John’s. The Christology and focus on scripture at St. John’s is not common, and some participants felt it important that it remain a constant while other things are in flux.
- Once one of these special people (those that go on the path to ministry) leave our church, we should have a way of following them, supporting and celebrating their journey.

### Discussion:

Although there is not a large literature about the role of the congregation in discernment to a call to ordered ministry, the descriptions of congregational cultures that facilitate individuals to pursue a ministerial vocation and the characteristics of mentoring environments prove helpful to discuss the findings of this focus group study.

*A call is multivocal.* In regards to the call to ordered ministry, Willimon (2002) wrote about its “multivocal” nature. He described a call coming from “above”, a personal invitation to use special gifts and enter into the vocation of ministry. In addition, there are voices from “below”, as in those around the discerner, which in many situations are heard through a congregation and church leaders. He found that congregations can be a rich resource of affirmation and clarification for those who are working to make sense of the different voices and messages they are receiving.

*A mentoring environment.* According to research into mentoring environments, there are characteristics that are associated with effectiveness (Daloz, 1996; Parks, 2011), they:

1. Create a network of belonging
2. Entertain “big-enough” questions that challenge in a context of relative safety
3. Encourage encounters with the appreciation of religious or cultural others
4. Nurture important habits of mind and “worthy dreams”
5. Provide access to key images, concepts and practices that reinforce such environments.

Further.. effective mentoring environments are:

*“committed:* they are cohesive and stable enough...

*connected:* they are internally flexible and/or externally adaptable enough...

*consistent:* they are predictable and safe enough... and

*challenging:* they are innovative and involved enough.” (Stokes & Marler, 2015 p. 71).

The findings of this study resonate with these descriptions, and may help explain what it is about St. John’s that has spawned the number of individuals going on to ordered ministry. For example, the theme “The Call” describes the multivocal nature of the experiences of the participants. Illustrating the complexity of the process that these individuals undergo. Although not all received direct involvement of their ministers when determining if they were being called, there was a general agreement that the congregation and the leadership were able to see what was happening in them, and how supported they felt.

In the “Safe and Supportive” theme, we can find many of the characteristics of an effective mentoring environment. It was clear that participants felt that they belonged at St. John’s; “Oh, this is the place I’m supposed to be” (P3). Also, the finding that participants felt they could explore their faith, discuss their struggles in a safe place was important, they felt that they could test their own understandings through leading worship or Bible study, are certainly “big enough” questions. In regards to the mentoring environment characteristic of nurturing habits of mind, participants talked about being engaged in meaningful parts of church life. And as was described in the subtheme “It operates through a ministry of all people”, there is a balance between taking worship seriously, but not so rigidly as to make it uncomfortable when learning how to lead activities that would become key elements of a minister’s life. In that way, St. John’s is *connected*, flexible and adaptable.

A final finding in Stokes and Marler’s study (2015) also resonates with St. John’s providing a mentoring environment. They learned that the most effective congregations work in the middle... somewhere between ‘enough’ and ‘just enough’, providing an edgy, dynamic that attracts learners and leaders. They offer suggestions to create and/or maintain this for those aspiring towards ordered ministry. For example, intentionally fostering the unique and influential role of laity, providing many and varied opportunities to participate in pastoral ministry, recognizing and celebrating steps that are achieved by discerners along their journey and looking carefully for ways to close the gap between clergy and laity.

The findings of this study suggest that St. John’s has been engaging in many of these approaches. It has been noticed that many people come from St. John’s to pursue a ministerial vocation. Perhaps it is because the congregation and its leadership have created an effective mentoring environment.

Gracious God, thank you for bringing these amazing people to me, who willingly shared their journey stories, shared their excitement for being in service to You and with us, thank you for filling my mind with these ideas and opening my heart to understand, so that we can re-inform, re-energize and lead a path for St. John's to continue to do this work, AMEN.

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