



Reimagining Holy Trinity Thornhill

December 20, 2021

Dear Fellow Parishioners,

We are writing today to share with you the report on our conversations to Reimagine Holy Trinity Church. As you will recall, we conducted a series of conversations with about forty parishioners in the spring and early summer of this year to discuss our ideas on what Holy Trinity means to us individually and collectively and where we wanted to see the church headed over the next decade.

This project was initiated by the Wardens and Advisory Board as a follow on to our 190th Anniversary celebration, and a desire to set goals as to where we wanted to be by our 200th Anniversary in 2030. At the same time, a number of parishioners had written to the Bishop of Toronto with concerns about Canon Stephen and his leadership. Finally, we adopted a motion at Vestry in February to address issues of anti-Black racism and bias at Holy Trinity and in the wider community. Although these three issues arose independently of each other, they all informed the conversations process and we looked for ways in which we could address all the issues. At the end, we hoped to identify the priorities that we need to work on over the next three years.

The attached report is a synopsis of the process and the conclusions reached by the four conversations groups. While we have attempted to find common themes and areas of consensus, it must be noted that there was not a lot of commonalities among the discussions. This speaks to diversity of views and interests within our congregation and the challenge in finding initiatives that we can all get behind. In the same way, when we attempted to categorize our strengths and weaknesses, not everyone felt that a strength was really a strength or a weakness a weakness. Most have elements of both within them. You may also feel that the report is more of the same old, same old. In many ways, the challenges we identified have been raised many times before. This does not mean that the process was meaningless. The difference must be found in what we will do to address them.

Despite the challenges of finding common ground, the steering committee and facilitators have identified four priority areas that we can focus on over the next three years.



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1. First, we need to adopt technology for all of our events (worship, communications, meetings etc.) that allows both in-person and virtual seamless attendance and interaction. While we have started with Zoom, we have a long way to go to be fully digital and in-person. This is a very technical challenge that will require professional advice, investments in new equipment and training for current parish staff and, quite possibly, new responsibilities for parish staff. **Initial steps are already underway on this priority.**
2. Secondly, we need to develop individual and collective ways to address the inappropriate behaviours, such as personal criticisms and verbal abuse, which have led to a negative and at times toxic environment at Holy Trinity. As our Mission Statement says, we need to create "an atmosphere of compassion and mutual respect." **The Advisory Board will be asked to consider this issue and possible initiatives at their meeting in January.**
3. Third is a process of education on the larger history of Canada's settler population (a term currently used to describe white, non-indigenous people) relationship with racialized people. Brother Reg will lead this process, but it requires our active participation and commitment to better understand the issues of race, systemic racism, and related social issues, and to seek ways to address these issues at Holy Trinity and in the broader community. This process is in line with the Diocesan initiative on anti-racism. **The sessions are planned to start in the third week of January.** The timing and format of the sessions will be subject to COVID restrictions and considerations.
4. Finally, we need to better engage with our community. This involves, in a missional sense, getting out into the community to see what God is already up to in terms of needs and activities and where we can contribute. It is about making Holy Trinity better known and understood in the community so that people are more aware of who we are and what we have to offer. This is a major initiative, building on many of our current strengths such as Out of the Cold, Christmas Assistance and Outreach. **Further work on this priority will await the arrival of our new priest in the fall.**



This communication is the first step in committing ourselves to these priorities. **We are proposing to hold a town hall meeting in the second half of January.** This will provide an opportunity for you to ask questions about this report, validate our conclusions, refine and confirm the priorities and identify volunteers who are willing to champion and support these initiatives. The timing and format of the sessions will be subject to COVID restrictions and considerations.

We are undertaking these initiatives at the same time we are beginning the process of selecting a new incumbent. The Reimagining document will provide valuable input to the Parish Profile and help us define our vision for the future and our expectations of a new priest.

We will be providing more detail on the town hall meeting early in the New Year. We thank all those who participated in the conversations for their contributions, and we look forward to discussing this further with all of you.

Sincerely,

The Reimagining Team

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Reimagining Holy Trinity Thornhill

Summary Report: December 2021

The “Re-imagining HTC” initiative was launched in the Spring of 2021. It was created by the desire to take stock of where we are as a Church in the community of Thornhill, and where we wanted to be in 2031 – HTC 200.

The process involved an invitation to any in the congregation who wished to be involved in a series of small group discussions, (all virtual!) led by volunteer parishioners who had participated in some prior leadership training. Each of the four groups was led by two facilitators and all-told, including the eight facilitators, some forty parishioners participated. After the discussions started, a small number of parishioners withdrew due to their disagreement with the process. All of this activity was supported by a Steering Committee comprised of the Lay Pastor and the Wardens. The discussions took place during the period April to June 2021.

Each group addressed a similar series of questions which focused overall on our experiences at HTC which, amongst other things included:

- Our experiences of God/Our Values/Our Worship
- Our Mission in the community, and how we see the community changing
- Our Strengths and Weaknesses, (as measured by a comparison with some of the “Characteristics of Thriving Churches”)
- Our Priorities for the future, as considered from the point of view as to what we should Stop, Continue, and Start to do.

GROUP FINDINGS

What follows is a summary of the various conclusions reached by the participants in the four groups. Obviously not all the matters raised could be included here. Rather, emphasis has been given to any common themes that emerged.

Our best experiences at HTC

The group discussions began with “best experiences” that covered all manner of situations. It was clear however, that most of these “best experiences” occurred when people were actually involved in church activities and *doing* something that utilized their skills, and which they found personally meaningful. This quickly led to the question of how to involve newcomers and others who were not involved. The question of how we can come to know their interests and understand which ministries might interest them was a theme which came up frequently in later discussions.

Our experiences of God

This was clearly a very individual matter, and some were not comfortable discussing something so personal. God was experienced by many in the liturgy and music, but also in fellowship and acts of service both inside and outside the church. The experience of worshipping together with a like-minded group was most important to many as a way of better understanding God.

Our Values

These included: deepening our faith through service to others, the fellowship of belonging to a loving community, love of learning, the importance of outreach to

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the wider community, and living as God has asked us to do. As one group pointed out, in many ways our Mission Statement sums up our values well – “We are a vibrant, welcoming, Christian community flourishing in God’s love through fellowship, outreach, worship and spiritual growth, in an atmosphere of

compassion and mutual respect.” How well we are “living” this mission statement is an interesting question. Many participants expressed a concern about feelings of negativity and hostility in the parish. This is in part due to our tolerance of bad behaviours in the past and possibly exacerbated by inadequate consultation and communication about our decisions. As a result, inappropriate behaviours such as criticism of individuals and verbal abuse have been experienced or observed by some participants and we seem to lack a way to challenge and correct these behaviours.

Our Worship

There was general consensus that a diverse mixture of service forms such as The Eucharist, Morning Prayer, and ACTION Sunday was a good thing along with a variety of music forms and special Cantata presentations. Many enjoyed the ACTION service, but not all. The high level of lay-person involvement in services was appreciated and encouraged.

It was frequently mentioned that services should not last more than an hour, and sermons should be relevant in that they relate the gospel teaching to our daily lives. The question was asked “do we need two Sunday services” and the majority wondered if the 8.00 AM service was still required. Some however believed the 8.00 AM service was most beneficial in that it was a very welcoming, tight-knit experience. Also, the question was asked, “is the time of our 10.00 AM service right considering the busy lives that young people lead today”? The Healing Service was considered to be important and a very beneficial part of worship. Youth should be engaged and respected members of the congregation and encouraged to participate in services.



Our Mission in the community

There was strong endorsement for the current outreach that exists-e.g., Out of the Cold, Christmas Assistance, inter-ministerial cooperation, support for food banks, the Shoebox program, and other outreach projects.

The community itself has undergone significant change during the last three decades with fewer Anglicans, fewer young families, and more diversity in terms of other cultures and faith groups. With the likelihood of the subway extension, we will see an increase in population density and more people living in apartments and condos. This implies that there will be an increased need for HTC to open ourselves and the building to additional community services, opportunities for fellowship, and spaces for other activities.

There were suggestions as to how we might prepare for this and improve what we now do, such as-better co-ordination with other churches and faith groups; improved communication to the community about what we do; improved understanding about what the community really needs, and liaison with local hospitals to ascertain needs. Possible programs could include: A community Fun Night, Moms and Tots, a barbeque, and more seniors' lunches.

Our Strengths and Weaknesses as compared to some of the “Characteristics of Thriving Churches.” (Some of these characteristics had been used before at HTC 10 or 20 years ago when we participated in the Natural Church Development Program).

Our Strengths

- Gift-based Ministry -- people use their God-given talents and spiritual gifts for Ministry both inside the church and in the local community. Our Green Initiative provides leadership to other parishes and in the community.
- Holistic small groups-- are well established and active-e.g., Bible study, ACW, Altar Guild etc. Important for fellowship and the forming of loving relationships.
- Effective Structures—the committees, organizations, and programs are well organized and for the most part, function well. The size and effectiveness of the ACW is particularly noteworthy.



- Fellowship Opportunities—have traditionally been plentiful and well supported-e.g., Footlights, Quilting and the Festival of Christmas. However, it was noted that some stresses were showing even before COVID e.g., difficulties finding volunteers to run the pancake supper.
- Learning from Scripture—we have a tradition of expertise and interest in this area.
- Missional Outreach—As previously noted this is well done but we can improve.

Our Weaknesses

- An aging congregation and a limited number of youth members.
- Empowering Leadership—Some believed that we need a more collaborative approach to decision-making and better communications.
- Passionate Spirituality—perhaps our Anglican traditions inhibit us here.
- Inspiring Worship Service—some participants generally felt our regular services were not very inspirational and too long. However, special services such as the Christmas and Easter cantatas scored much better.
- Welcoming—We need to review the entire process of how we welcome newcomers and engage all the Parish in church activities and groups. This extends to the matter of how we include the diverse racial groups as well.
- Pastoral and Lay visitation—We welcome more visitation, and we need to improve the process for identifying need.
- Loving Relationships—We need to address issues of angry, judgmental criticism that have prevented some of us from loving our neighbours. This has led to an underlying tension among some members within the congregation.

What we should “Stop, Start, Continue”

In the “Stop, Start and Continue” categories, many of the matters had already been identified by the participants in earlier discussions. At the risk of some degree of redundancy and repetition however, here are the matters identified, beyond those that would continue as a matter of course such as “sound financial and property stewardship”:



Continue

- our diversity in worship patterns including the hybrid approach of live, in-person and virtual services.
- the position of parish nurse supported by a wellness committee
- encouraging a high level of lay involvement in the worship service
- seniors' lunches
- our healing service
- our Green Initiative
- Christian education and spiritual growth (Bible Study, daily devotions, praying the headlines, etc.)

Stop

- being stuck in tradition
- the negativity that exists in our parish which takes the form of judgmental criticism

Start

- interacting and communicating more with the community and other churches and faith groups
- opening up more spaces for renters and community programs
- increasing pastoral visits and improve process to assess needs
- addressing racism and diversity
- addressing the issue of negativity
- experimenting with different service times & formats (e.g., is 10 AM good for young parents in the years to come?)
- "living" our Mission Statement.



PRIORITIES FLOWING FROM ALL OF THE ABOVE

The following four priorities were identified by all four of the conversation groups as important matters for action. They are in no particular order.

1. First, we need to adopt technology for all of our events (worship, meetings, communications, etc.) that allows both in-person and virtual seamless attendance and interaction. While we have begun this process, we have a long way to go to be fully digital and in-person. This is a very technical challenge that will require professional advice, investments in new equipment, and training for current parish staff and, quite possibly, new responsibilities for them. Initial steps are underway on this priority.
2. Secondly, we need to develop individual and collective ways to address inappropriate behaviours such as personal criticisms and verbal abuse, which has led at times to a negative and toxic environment at Holy Trinity. The history of the last 30 or 40 years shows that this is not just a recent phenomenon. In the words of our Mission Statement, we need to create an “atmosphere of compassion and mutual respect.”
3. Third is a process of education on the larger history of the relationship of Canada’s settler population (a term currently used to describe white, non-indigenous people) with racialized people. Brother Reg will lead this process, and it will require our active participation and commitment to better understand the issues of race, systemic racism, and related social issues, and to seek ways to address these issues both at Holy Trinity and in the broader community. This process is complementary to the Diocesan initiative on anti-racism. The sessions are planned to start in the third week of January. The timing and format will be subject to COVID restrictions and considerations.
4. Finally, we need to better engage with our community. This involves getting out into the community to see what God is already up to, what the needs are, and how we can best contribute. It is also about explaining Holy Trinity, in terms of who we are and what we do, to the community. This is a major initiative, building on our current Outreach program, already outlined as one of our major strengths. Further work on this priority will await the arrival of our new priest next year.

Overall and most importantly, we need to be realistic, and aware of the need to balance our priorities with our ability to deliver.



CONCLUSIONS

The process was not perfect by any means; the group sizes were imbalanced ranging from two to more than ten; it took time to develop a trust for participants to truly share and dare, and some materials for the facilitators/participants were late in arriving. However, most participants indicated that they enjoyed the experience and would welcome the opportunity to join future discussion groups.

It is to be hoped that the findings of this report will become a spur for needed change, provide a vision for the future, and help to inform the parish profile that will be required as we seek for a new parish priest.

