Visioning & Discernment Process report

SUBMITTED TO: Norval United Church

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| NorvaL United church: Report |

Introduction

Norval United Church (Norval) is well over 100 years old. Throughout its history, Norval has been a congregation of care and mutual support. The pandemic, the changing social context in the larger Canadian culture, the move to a new building in November 2019, and the anticipated retirement of Norval’s long time Minister all make the current moment an opportune time to engage in a visioning and discernment process. This process invites Norval to reflect on who the congregation is, what its strengths are and how it is being called. This report represents one portion of this process.

In June 2021, Norval contracted with Credence to support the congregation’s “Dream Team” with its visioning and discernment process. Credence interviewed a range of congregational leaders, either individually or as a group; the Dream team facilitated 5 focus groups. This report is based on these meetings.

Credence conducted interviews with the following persons/groups between November 2021 and January 2022: Board, Minister, Finance Committee, Youth Minister, Interim Office Administrator and the Elders. The Dream Team held focus groups between November 2021 and March 2022. All participants were asked a series of questions, as outlined in the document below.

Why this conversation now?

Norval is on the cusp of opportunity, with a new building, a new location, new neighbours, and a new capacity to welcome and host the larger Georgetown community. This potential, with its endless possibilities, is waiting to be explored, and invites Norval to think about what it means to be the church at this time in this physical location. Norval expresses the desire to look outward, and to respond to the changing/pivoting world with a willingness to pivot as well.

Who is Norval?

A caring, giving, and serving community, with deep rural roots: Norval has deep roots in the farming community. The congregation was originally comprised of six or seven close-knit farming families who gave generously and opened their doors to welcome others in. A new generation came to join “the farmers.” Many of these farmers have since died or moved away, but the legacy of a close-knit community continues. Deep connections and loyalty live on, even as the congregation transitions into a new life stage with a new building.

*We see Norval as a caring, forgiving, non-judgmental Christian community that welcomes all people to share God’s love and to reach out to serve others. Norval is a place of belonging: Membership is not just attending on Sundays. Some people think of Norval as their church even if they do not attend every Sunday. Belonging is not about how often a person is in the pews. At Norval we have the attitude: “You are part of Norval, however you connect with us.” Some think of Norval more as a “community hub” than traditional church.*

A blessed community: Norval has a sense of being blessed. Some years ago, Norval was not sure how to move forward with the idea of a new building, but the right people showed up, raised money, built, and paid for the new building. There has been a lot of organic growth in the last 10 years, which makes the congregation hopeful. The COVID-19 pandemic seemed like a disaster, but through it, Norval has added 500 people to the congregation as Norval was fast-forwarded into online ministry. Despite the challenges faced at Norval, there is always an attitude within the church of positivity, and of being blessed.

Both progressive and grounded: Norval is not a “typical” congregation that focuses on Sunday mornings; the congregation reaches out beyond Sundays in many ways. Norval is willing to hold uncomfortable conversations, and enjoys exploring “outside the box” by being willing to take risks and experiment (such as the intentional community established next to the church). Yet, Norval is not so modern, or “of the moment” so as not to be grounded in the tradition of Christianity. Norval values its faith foundation as a grounding for the congregation. Some wonder if Norval is entering into a new stage, with less emphasis on worship and more on Norval as a place that provides the opportunity to give to something larger than oneself, while animating awareness of spirituality in the larger community.

Norval Outreach: Norval reaches out to different members of the wider community. This includes people arriving to the community as refugees and the bereaved in the community (grief groups, bereaved parents, divorce recovery). Outreach is a commitment, shown by a line item in the budget.

Active**:** Norval is at its best when working on big outreach projects (e.g., hay project). At Norval, faith is expressed as action more than as a belief system.Norval sees itself as “young at heart” and resilient. There is enough leadership that can come together to collaborate and address challenges that arise, with a “can do” passion and energy. Norval loves responding to need, knowing it is useful in the world.

Relevant Spirituality: The fact that Norval has managed to attract and keep people in their 40s and 50s suggests to some that the church is relevant and is meeting a need. Norval offers meaningful Sunday worship, providing what people truly need, not what Norval thinks people need. *The elemental aspect of Norval is not Bible verses being read on Sundays or the “theory” of the Christian faith, but rather a relevant message that creates a vivid visualization of the Scriptures that can be applied to daily life in practical ways**.*

Strengths of the congregation

Friendly, Welcoming and Caring: Norval emphasizes community within the congregation which is nurtured by storytelling. The strength of the community is shown in the way people are invited to offer their diverse talents and unique contributions with no particular expectations about what style is acceptable. Individuals with a wide range of “beliefs” and wide span of age find a place of belonging. Norval seeks to welcome all people, irrespective of how they express (or not) a spirituality. Many describe Norval as having no cliques, with no hierarchy evident.

Music:Several people emphasize the joy Norval finds in music.

Ministry Leadership: Norval is currently blessed with two strong and gifted ministry leaders, both with excellent communication skills. Paul has been a key leader for 30 years, crucial to the development of the current congregation. Jen, a newer addition to the staff team, is very gifted with children and youth, as well as families, and participates in a wide range of ministries.

Financial Stability/Generosity:Norval is currently strong financially. Norval’s financial strength is expressed in a number of ways: the value of the land, the value of the building, and the generosity of the congregants. There is evidence of deep generosity, even without the Finance committee proactively cultivating stewardship. Norval’s generosity is the fruit of meaningful relationships with the congregation, cultivated over the years.

Challenges facing Norval

Norval and its Minister

There seems unanimous consensus that the identity of Norval is deeply connected with its Minister, Paul Ivany. Many attend Norval because of Paul. Paul is described as kind and gentle, creating goodwill in the congregation, and offering sermons that are relevant and helpful. The Minister is nearing retirement age. While there are no specific plans around this, there is an awareness that this transition is on the horizon, and the grief it will bring. Given how well-loved Paul is and how closely connected to the identity of the congregation, Paul’s retirement will be a significant transition around which good communication is key.

The challenges of this transition are multi-faceted.

* Expectations of role & workload:Paul is a “traditional Minister” in a number of ways. He is available 24/7 and knows everyone. As such, Paul represents a more “rural" style of ministry: the Minister is involved in everything. Because Paul is so involved, Norval leans on him. The congregation has high expectations of whoever will come next. There is a concern that it might be hard to find someone who works as hard as Paul.
* Identity: Given that Norval has a strong and compelling leader, some observe that it is possible that Norval has an under-developed sense of identity and purpose separate from its leader. Now that Norval is faced with an array of new possibilities, the congregation is seen as needing a more internally-developed spirituality, purpose and call to guide the church into its future.
* Relationship between Paul and Norval post-retirement*:* Paul is very active in the community, conducting many weddings and funerals. Someask*: Will Paul still do funerals once he retires? Will he still be a trustee? How would Paul relate to a new Minister? What will happen with The Daily Minute, which now has* *2300 email addresses and attracts significant donations?*

Cultural Changes with a New Location

The shift to the new location has brought some unanticipated challenges.

* There is a greater cultural difference between the rural hamlet of Norval and the town of Georgetown than was originally anticipated. The new building is only a 10-minute drive away from the former location, but the Georgetown location brings with it a different, more suburban mindset.
* There are a lot of possibilities for rental of the church building given the low level of rental space in Georgetown. This represents an opportunity, but also requires organization on Norval’s part to manage this. This management includes staffing, management practices, and policies. Given the size of the new building, stewardship and maintenance requires a new level of energy. As well, there are more exits and entrances; a greeting team on Sunday mornings is needed rather than one gifted individual who greets people as they enter the sanctuary.
* Some wonder whether the distinct strengths of a rural congregation are challenging to retain as the congregation grows. The new context allows for expanded outreach which may impact priorities to ensure both pastoral care in the congregation and outreach.

Demographics & Staffing

* Demographics: Norval’s demographics are changing, causing both growth and worries about decline at the same time: (a) A core group is aging: this is evidenced by the loss of the UCW (United Church Women) and the Senior Choir. Some express concern for the needs of those in Long Term Care to stay connected with the congregation. (b) Norval has grown through its online community, and through increased and/or ongoing participation among adults. (c) There are fewer children and young families at Norval than in the past. Norval has hoped the new church building and location would attract families but, given the pandemic, it is too early to see whether this is the case.
* Youth & Children’s Ministry: Norval has a core of children and is committed to reinvigorating youth/children’s ministry; however, Norval’s ministry with children and youth is facing significant challenges. Like other congregations, Norval faces challenges with being relevant to the younger generation, who may have preconceived attitudes to “church” and whose time for church is in competition with other activities. During the pandemic, Norval’s ministry with the younger generation has experienced increased challenges because it thrives on in-person relationships.

2/3 of the Youth Minister’s time is devoted to the summer camping ministry. This ministry offers powerful leadership training experience to teenagers. However, there is little connection between the summer experience and the ongoing life of the congregation. Norval would like to explore ways to integrate and connect the summer ministry with the wider congregation.

* Volunteers: The aging of core members brings decreased energy for volunteering. The role of the church in one’s life and time for volunteering is experienced differently by younger generations. This is having an impact on the number of volunteers at Norval. Some express deep concern about the challenges associated with drawing enough volunteers at Norval: those currently bearing the load are feeling strain, and it is not clear if or how a growing online community can contribute to the volunteer pool.
* Staffing and organization of volunteers: As Norval grows, Norval will need to increase staffing, paying people for work that used to be done by volunteers. Norval may need to consider hiring someone full-time to manage rentals, and someone to manage both volunteers and operations as the staff size increases. A larger team requires new patterns of communication and clear decision-making, as well as policy/administrative revisions (e.g., clearer job descriptions and review processes). Volunteers need care: recruiting, managing, acknowledging, and encouraging. The new context may require staff for the online ministry, and staff to focus on nurturing connection to Georgetown.

Diversity

Georgetown is not very ethnically diverse, and Norval is mostly white, middle-class, and suburban. Georgetown is changing, and the new development around Georgetown reflect more diversity. Some ask: *What would need to be true about Norval to become more diverse? Could we partner with other faith communities?*

Spirituality

Norval has emphasized the church as a place of rest and comfort, which creates a strong connection with people who are bereaved. Some wonder whether the congregation also needs a ministry that challenges them to go beyond their comfort zone, to reach out, empowered with a sense of mission of “bringing God to the world.” Some feel an urgency to deepen and expand the meaning of faith in a changing culture, through small group studies. Some long for deeper theology and deeper contemplation: *How is the church also a place of empowerment, so that ownership of the ministry is shared more widely?*

Outreach

One of Norval’s strengths is generous financial outreach initiatives. Some also hope for Norval to find hands-on expressions of outreach that require time and energy (and not only money), to allow congregants to build relationships with one another and to ensure outreach is accessible to those who are less affluent. Some long to strengthen Norval’s active involvement in the community by partnering with other outside organizations, allowing Norval to learn from them. Some ask: *What would it look like for Norval to invite conversations about spirituality in the secular world (businesses, media, etc.) as well as church*?

Long-term Finances

Norval’s current financial situation is excellent, partly because of the old farm families, and some very generous benefactors. The long-term financial forecast is less clear, given the transition from farm families to newer suburban families. A younger demographic that may not share the same tradition of loyalty and giving. Some request more transparency around finances related to patterns of giving and sources of funds.

Impact of the Pandemic/Online Community

The pandemic has impacted Norval in many ways. It has been steep learning curve to shift to online ministry, demanding a lot of energy. The pandemic has slowed down timelines for mission and engaging in outreach. Some note that Norval must invest in technological support and think more about the technology side of ministry; this may be the “new age” of the church, and may be a way to especially reach young people.

There are multiple strengths associated with Norval’s online community: Online worship offers a good alternative for those who cannot attend worship on Sunday morning, and has actively created a sense of belonging. The online community also poses challenges: *What does it mean to be a “virtual” spiritual community*? The pandemic “disconnect” means that some are not as motivated to relate to one another by screen; people can get spiritual nurture at home and at 500 miles away. The integration of the in-person and online communities is a challenge: some believe that without the in-person foundation, the online community would disappear. The question of membership becomes more complex: does the online community have membership (and voting privileges) like the in-person community? Some who attend in person feel the loss of the Minister being physically in the sanctuary because of the technical requirements associated with online worship. A virtual community is regarded as not being available to strengthen Norval’s volunteer pool.

What opportunities do you see on the horizon for Norval? What is your hope for Norval?

Those interviewed identified a wide array of brainstormed possibilities for Norval:

* Community kitchen as a means of outreach and support; community garden, chickens
* A housing development on church property
* A coffee shop, food trucks, chicken BBQ, a drive-thru pancake supper to engage diverse populations; online silent auction; parking lot and outdoor space for movie nights; carnivals; indoor theatre
* 20,000 people on Norval’s doorstep means there are opportunities to serve, including support to young parents and families (e.g., there is a high need for daycare in the area)
* Rentals: Norval’s space is unique in the area and serves a need simply by the size of its interior space; it is ideal for large weddings and funerals.
* Integrate people from neighbouring UCC congregations that are closing; work collaboratively with other churches in Georgetown
* Offer placements for high school students to collect volunteer hours
* Offer mental health support groups
* Continue with guest speakers
* Re-think Norval’s management structure, shifting from a Board to a management team.
* Practice proactive stewardship, offering information on how to donate; develop a “donate button” for mobile phones.
* Reach people through different media formats e.g. snippets of a service on YouTube, TikTok; Daily Minute on social media; short music videos; Facebook Live
* Initiate focus group with youth to learn about ideas for uses of media.

Next Steps

The process that led to this report was designed to gather information from the congregation regarding its sense of identity, including congregational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. Now the hard work of discernment begins. Given everything the congregation has shared related to its identity, how is the congregation being called? What key and defining priorities is the congregation being invited to embrace at this time? To help answer this question, the Dream Team is planning the following steps:

1. Meeting with Ministerial Team to (a) review this document; (b) set 3 – 5 priorities for the congregation based on the outcomes of this document; and (c) establish timelines and milestones for rolling out the next steps.
2. Meeting with the Norval Executive to (a) review this document, and (b) discuss the priorities for the congregation established by the Ministerial Team and Dream Team.
3. Meeting with the Norval congregation to (a) review this document, and (b) discuss the priorities for the congregation established by the Ministerial Team and Dream Team.
4. Once the priorities are established and confirmed, the Ministerial Team together with the Dream Team or an alternate Norval Team will be tasked with establishing concrete operational steps to act on the established priorities.