

Chalmers / Sydenham Street
United Churches Joint Committee

Report to the Congregations

May 2016

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Background

The congregations of Chalmers United Church and Sydenham Street United Church (SSUC) have a history reaching back across many decades of worshiping together and sharing activities, which has inspired a sense of common mission and purpose. It has also been the occasion for the strengthening and renewal of friendships and the discovery of new acquaintances among the members and adherents of the two congregations.

Recent trends and developments within the congregations, and beyond, have motivated both reflection and the awareness that an even closer relationship would enhance the effectiveness of the ministries of both congregations by building on mutual strengths and spiritual, human and physical resources.

At the same time, there is a strong desire that the congregations continue on a viable basis, each with its own distinctive character, mission and commitments, and that the congregations initiate intentional discussions around cooperation in areas such as shared ministry of the word, sacraments, pastoral care, music, and outreach, as well as shared programs, activities and administration.

The Joint Committee recently established by the congregations has identified and explored these intentions and aspirations, and is enthusiastically recommending that the efforts to identify the common interests of the congregations, and to pursue cooperation in the above-mentioned areas continue.

Mandate of the Joint Committee

Following informal discussions over 2102-2013, in early 2014 the two congregations established the Chalmers/SSUC Joint Committee with a mandate to:

“Explore, in consultation with the congregations and ministry staff, the possibilities for a more formal relationship between the congregations and develop a vision for the United Church of Canada presence in downtown Kingston in 2020.”

Overview of the work of the Committee

Four Chalmers representatives (Lynne Clarke, Juliet Huntly, Bob Little and Doug MacLean) and four SSUC representatives (Kenn Doerksen, Bruce Hutchinson, James Leake and Ruth Wilson) have been meeting regularly over the past year two years. Juliet replaced Mary Stewart Ross on the committee, who served until 2014. Over that time, the members of the Committee have come to know and appreciate each other, and have developed a deeper and more nuanced understanding of our shared context.

Direction of the congregations

There are similarities between the two congregations but also some important differences. Obvious similarities include declining numbers, ageing members (the demographic of both congregations is the same), financial concerns and the stewardship of beautiful heritage buildings. Neither congregation is financially viable in the longer term under current operating assumptions. Sydenham Street is an Affirming congregation, has a three-stream governance model and is working towards a model of building use involving shared church and community use of its facilities. To date, Chalmers has maintained a more traditional model of governance and building use. Both congregations, however, increasingly recognize the need for change.

Mission to the downtown

As part of the mandate, the Committee was asked to discern ministry needs in downtown Kingston. To this end, we have met with the City and also with The United Way, to explore their priorities. Both organizations have collaborated on a coordinated community strategy to address housing and homelessness – a critical issue for the City. A major report was published in 2013. The United Way also shared with us the 2014 report on their Poverty Initiative: Plans for Action as a Community. Although the Joint Committee did not identify any specific way in which the congregations might partner with the community, we agreed that the needs are great and social concerns in the downtown need to be kept ‘top of mind’ as we move forward. Through interchurch conversations, perhaps facilitated by Presbytery, we should be open to opportunities for Chalmers and SSUC to respond positively and constructively in the downtown context.

Towards Shared Mission and Ministry

Over the time that the Joint Committee has been meeting, a number of things have been occurring that have prompted greater reflection on the possibilities of shared mission and ministry between Chalmers and SSUC:

Chalmers and SSUC (and other congregations in the area) have been doing more and more things together. For example, in the past year alone, there have been:

- Shared services at Christmas, on Good Friday and after Easter;
- Shared worship during the summer months;
- Shared summer programming for children (Summer in the City);
- A joint men’s group, which meets monthly;
- Joint membership in the Inter-Church Refugee Partnership.
- SSUC has stated very clearly that it wants to be in shared ministry with other congregations in downtown Kingston and has reached out to Chalmers with a strong invitation to pursue shared ministry.
- Rev. Elizabeth McDonald has announced her retirement – effective June 2016 – initiating a Joint Needs Assessment process at SSUC that is reporting to the SSUC congregation in mid-May 2016.

- Chalmers entered into a Jubilee time in September 2015, and has been intentionally reflecting on its self-identity.

In light of the move toward greater collaboration between the two congregations, Chalmers Coordinating Council of Elders appointed an observer to the SSUC Joint Needs Assessment Committee and SSUC Executive appointed an observer to serve on the Chalmers Jubilee Planning Team.

There are indications from both congregations that the time is ripe for moving forward with more concrete planning for shared ministry:

Chalmers

The Jubilee weekend event with Rev. Russell Daye in January 2016 offered participants a chance to talk in small groups about their hopes and dreams for the future of Chalmers. No explicit question was posed about greater cooperation with another church community; however, the following comments were noted in response to questions about what it means to be a faithful and relevant faith community in downtown Kingston, and what has to be born/grow and shrink/die for that to happen.

“Don’t compete with other churches – plan together, not in isolation”

“Chalmers may have to re-invent itself, possibly joining with Sydenham Street or other churches or organizations, for the most recent two generations who have not been part of a faith community, including school children.”

“It only makes sense that Sydenham and Chalmers should be one congregation. Sydenham sees its building as an asset to the community. The time is over for competition.”

“We need to grow our relationship with Sydenham, we need to shrink our attachment to our building, we need to grow this conversation, what needs to be born is experimentation and failure. A strong sense of community can weather experimentation.”

“Both Sydenham Street and Chalmers are struggling. Why are we wasting money on two buildings? I’d like to see the churches shrink and the congregations grow.”

“We have to grow a relationship with Sydenham and worry less about which building.”

“Cooperation with SSUC??”

Sydenham Street United Church (SSUC)

The SSUC JNAC process included a survey to the congregation asking a number of questions about mission and ministry needs. The congregation received completed surveys. A dozen questions were asked that sought to determine the strength of support for a number of options the SSUC congregation might consider in the months to come.

A strong majority of survey participants support the need for change in ministry. Sharing, or joining forces with others, found favour or strong favour with over 80% of respondents in the following four areas:

- i. Joining other congregations or community groups in outreach or mission programs;
- ii. Sharing custodial and/or administrative staff and costs with another congregation;
- iii. Merging some of our programs with those of other congregations;
- iv. Sharing music ministry with other congregations.

There was somewhat less enthusiasm for:

- v. Alternating worship sites with other congregations (72%); and
- vi. Formal amalgamation with another congregation (67.5%).

As to appointing a new minister, respondents favoured or were strongly in favour of:

- i. Sharing ministerial staff and costs with other congregation(s) – 83%;
- ii. Appointing an interim or supply minister until we determine our direction – 79%;

Respondents were less inclined to favour, or strongly favour:

- iii. Appointing a long-term, part-time minister of 'our own' – 51%.

These findings were strongly supported by congregational responses during table group discussions at the worship service on April 17, 2016.

Motion

Resolution of the Congregation of Chalmers United Church and Sydenham Street United Church

Whereas:

- A. The congregations of Chalmers United Church and Sydenham Street United Church have a long history of joint worship and activities undertaken by the two congregations;
- B. The congregations set up a Joint Committee in 2012 "to explore, in consultation with the congregations and ministry staff, the possibilities for a more formal relationship between the congregations and develop a vision for the United Church of Canada presence in downtown Kingston in 2020";
- C. The Joint Committee has been meeting and consulting with members of the congregations, and various community members in downtown Kingston;
- D. The Joint Committee has discerned a desire for a closer relationship to enhance the effectiveness of the ministries of both congregations by building on mutual strengths and spiritual, human and physical resources;

- E. It is desirable that the congregations continue on a viable basis, each with its own distinctive character, mission and commitments, but at the same time enter into intentional discussions around cooperation in areas such as a shared ministry of the word, sacraments, pastoral care, music, faith formation for all ages and outreach, shared administration, and shared programs and activities; and
- F. The Joint Committee has recommended that it continue its efforts to identify the common interests of the congregations, and pursue cooperation in the above-mentioned areas.

RESOLVED THAT:

1. The above affirmations are hereby approved.
2. It is declared and affirmed that the congregations will explore joint initiatives in the areas of shared ministry of the word, sacraments, pastoral care, music, faith formation for all ages and outreach, shared administration, and shared programs and activities.
3. The Joint Committee be re-mandated to undertake further consultations with members of the congregations, staff, and others as may be appropriate, regarding the opportunities for cooperation and joint initiatives in the above areas, with the expectation that specific initiatives may be acted on when ready and that reports to the congregations are made periodically.
4. The nature of future cooperation between the congregations will be defined and a detailed implementation plan will be approved by both congregations, no later than June 2017.
5. The composition of the Joint Committee will include the current members and four additional members, two to be named by each congregation.

1. *Are both congregations voting on the same motion?*

Yes. The same motion is coming before both congregations on the same day.

2. *Is this really about amalgamation of the two congregations?*

No. The proposal to consider greater shared ministry assumes that there will be two ongoing congregations, each with its distinctive character and ministry.

3. *Will the conversation involve the possibility of the closure or sale of one of either the SSUC or Chalmers church buildings?*

No. There is no mandate to consider the sale or closure of either church building. The Joint Committee has discerned little interest within the Chalmers congregation in the closure of the Chalmers building, and the results of the recent SSUC survey indicated 79% opposed to such a direction, and more than 90% either in favour or strongly in favour of expanded use of the Sydenham Street United Church building by arts and other community groups.

4. *Why don't I see any detail about what "shared ministry" would look like?*

The focus of the next phase of discussion between the two congregations (over the coming year) would be precisely to explore in concrete detail, what greater shared ministry could look like.

5. *Is this conversation limited to just Chalmers and SSUC?*

No. There are many possibilities for richer shared ministry among the United Church congregations in downtown Kingston. The initial conversation is with closest neighbours – currently SSUC has reached out most openly and intentionally to Chalmers – but initiatives with other congregations might well be explored over time.

6. *Will currently serving ministry personnel and staff be negatively impacted by this discussion?*

No. There will be no negative impact on current members of staff and ministry personnel during the time of conversations between Chalmers and SSUC. Any specific proposal for shared ministry that comes out of the conversation would come before both congregations for a vote and any resultant staffing implications would be implemented through the formal means that are in place, including the full participation of Presbytery.

Appendix 2.

Membership of the Committee

Chalmers

Lynne Clarke
Mary Stewart Ross (until 2014)
Juliet Huntly (from 2014)
Bob Little
Doug MacLean
Rev. Drew Strickland (ex officio)

Sydenham Street United Church (SSUC)

Kenn Doerksen
Bruce Hutchinson
James Leake
Ruth Wilson
Rev. Elizabeth Macdonald (ex officio)