



September 19, 2020

First United Church  
Waterloo, ON

Dear First United Church,

Welcome to Fall! It has been a strange time in which we have been living these past number of months. As you know, in February 2020 First United Church began a renewal and revitalization journey – a journey that we put on hold as we tried to pay attention to what was emerging for our world during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic is not over, it has entered a type of “new normal” phase. We know now that this pandemic will be with us for a while. At this time, it feels important to restart our renewal and revitalization journey, to think together about what it means to be the church during and following a pandemic.

By way of reminder, I want to highlight the steps we have taken on the renewal journey thus far:


- February 2, 2020: Gathering regarding what it means to be the church in an age of anxiety.
- February 2020: Survey and interviews
- March 1, 2020: Gathering regarding who First United is today and what it means to wrestle with our sense of identity (including how Jacob wrestled with God.)
- March 29, 2020: Sermon regarding seasons of wilderness and an invitation to prayer.
- April 2020: Weekly invitations to prayer and to listening for how God is calling First United.

It appears that our society is still in a season of wilderness: Alongside the age of anxiety that we talked about in February, we are experiencing a pandemic, a collective reckoning with our nation’s history of racism, political turmoil in various parts of the world, and news of traumas related to environmental crises. The question of how God is calling is our world and First United is critical. Taken together, the struggles of our society seem to be forcing us to ask the following questions:



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)

50 Ottawa Street S., Suite 346, Kitchener, ON N2G 3S7  
519.883.8906 • [info@credenceandco.com](mailto:info@credenceandco.com)

- 
- In what kind of world do we want to live? What kind of world do we want to leave for our grandchildren? Or, said differently, what kind of world is God wanting to call into being?
  - What is our role as First United in helping this world to emerge?
  - What spiritual disciplines must we practice in order to be the kind of people that can help the world God envisions come into being?
  - What does this mean practically for First United?

Could it be that we are being called to become co-creators of the society God is seeking to call forth? What would it be like to use this pandemic moment to help shape the world that emerges from this time?

We want to think through these questions together. Our timeline for doing so, is as follows:

- Please, take some time to review the videos [you find here](#). They are recordings of the material we covered in February and March 2020.
- Please review the attachments to this letter. These documents record the work we have already completed together.
- On October 25, 2020, Credence will provide the sermon. Following the sermon, Credence will facilitate a congregational conversation.
- Between October 25, 2020 and November 15, 2020, the congregation will be invited to enter of time of prayer, conversation and discernment regarding how First United is being called.
- On November 15, 2020, Credence will facilitate a second congregational conversation.
- The Reference Group will meet with Credence after the November gathering to sort through your feedback and propose a plan for First United.

We look forward to meeting with you!

With best wishes,

*Betty Pries & Cayla Charles*

Consultants  
Credence & Co.



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)

50 Ottawa Street S., Suite 346, Kitchener, ON N2G 3S7  
519.883.8906 • [info@credenceandco.com](mailto:info@credenceandco.com)



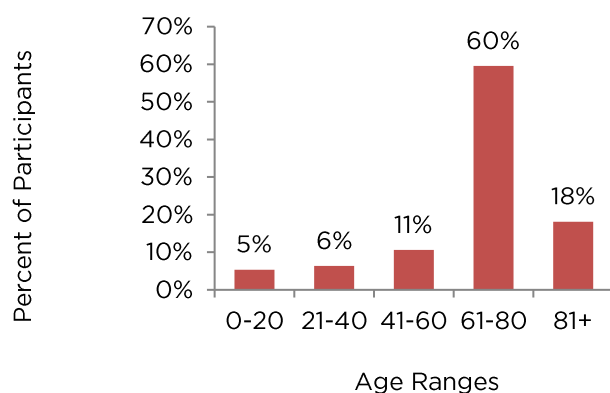
## “What We Think We Know” First United Church (Waterloo)

March 4, 2020

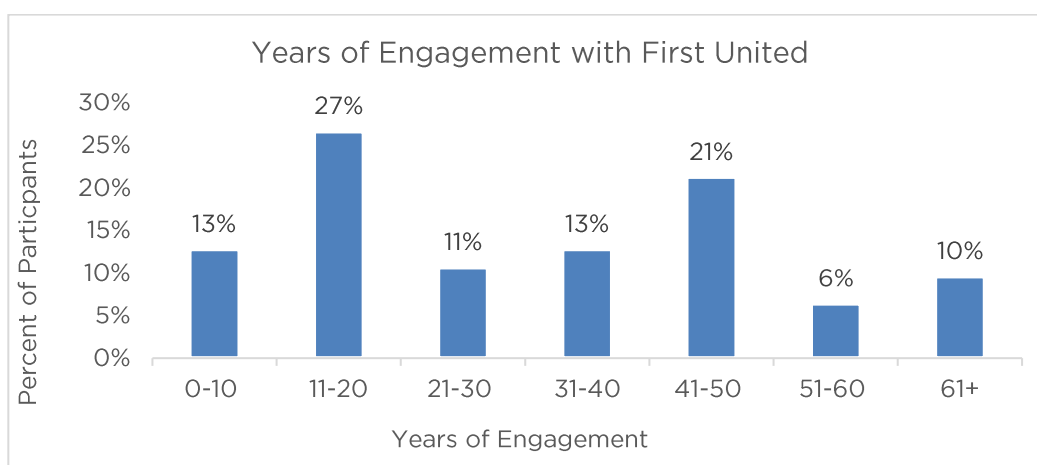
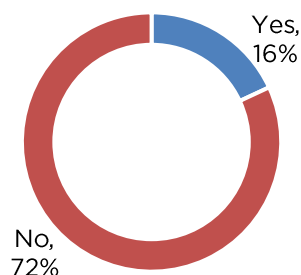
This document is based on 18 randomly selected interviews, a group interview with the Reference Group and the information found in the 76 surveys filled out (online and on paper) by members of the congregation. The document is a collation of the perspectives of the congregation, provided in aggregate fashion to ensure confidentiality. In general, comments heard only once are not included in the document.

The following diagrams are tallies of the survey and interview respondents.

Ages of Survey and Interview Participants



Participants with Children  
Attending First United



Credence & Co.  
SUPPORTING LEADERS, TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATIONS

[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)

50 Ottawa Street S., Suite 346, Kitchener, ON N2G 3S7  
519.883.8906 • [info@credenceandco.com](mailto:info@credenceandco.com)



## Overview

We are a congregation of people who contribute to the church community – and beyond – in many important ways. We are located in a well-used building in the heart of Uptown Waterloo and enjoy being located in this hub of activity. We are an affirming congregation. Many of us deeply value the community we find at First United. The music here draws many of us in. Some of us are especially drawn to First United for spiritual nourishment and for the congregation's community service work. We have a heart for the underserved in our community.

We regard ourselves as a welcoming congregation, though this is not felt by everyone in the same way. We do not receive many new visitors on Sunday mornings. Some are very 'in the know' about what's happening, others only find out after an event has passed. Some feel very connected; others less so. There can be a feeling of an "inner and outer ring" at the church.

## Demographics, Attendance & Finances

- The majority of our members are over 60 years old. We have some younger families and youth for which we are grateful.
- We have a small but engaged youth group (who enjoy the Sunday Café) and our Messy Church ministry engages younger people. We have approximately 150 active participants and many of us desire for that number to grow.
- Some of us worry about our finances; others think we are doing well financially.
  - Our financial fears are driven by our shifting demographics.
  - Many of us (though not all) are concerned about the cost of maintaining a visibly aging (and not fully accessible) building and with the supports and programming that we offer.
  - Some have concerns that, though the work of the staff is valuable, we may not be able to afford the staff we have.

## Strengths, Assets, Opportunities

- We love the musical gifts that are present and are shared at First United.
- We support the outreach programs that we run in the community and appreciate that this congregation is one that is interested in these types of programs. Our location offers ample opportunity for community connections and outreach.
- Many offer their time, money, and talents to church programs and activities.
- Many of us feel a strong sense of fellowship and community at the church. There are many positive feelings around fellowship with, and support from, others in the congregation.
- Some of us find pastoral care and opportunities for faith development to be a strength at First United.
- Several of us wonder about exploring the idea of amalgamation with another congregation as a way of addressing questions related to sustainability.

---

**Credence & Co.**  
SUPPORTING LEADERS, TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATIONS



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)

- Some of us are deeply interested in engaging in a process of listening to where God is calling us as a congregation and of what God is calling us to let go.

## Challenges and Fears

- Size and Change
  - There are fewer people attending our church than many remember from years past. This causes us to worry for our future.
  - We were once the “cathedral” or corporate church for the United Church of Canada in Waterloo. This causes some to look at us negatively. We are not a corporate church anymore. We do not have the power or influence we once had. We wonder sometimes who we are today.
  - It is hard to engage in conversations about vision and change (including letting go of old programs) because we don’t want to have conflict with one another, and we do not want to lose people. We recognise that there are differences in perspective among us. While this can be a good thing, it requires us to open ourselves to alternate voices.
- Community beyond and inside of our walls
  - Some of us feel that we are more connected to the community beyond the walls of the church than the community within the church.
  - Some of us have experienced our personal needs, as congregants, not being met by the church.
  - Some of our ministries (such as Messy Church) can be seen as disconnected from the Sunday morning congregation or that the congregation is disconnected from our ministries.
- Spiritual Nourishment
  - While some feel that the church feeds them spiritually, others do not.
  - Some expressed a desire for more pastoral care for elderly members.
- Worship
  - Although many enjoy the sermons, some fear the sermons lack present-day relevance (personal and societal). Some are interested in small group gatherings for worship and spiritual conversation.
- Lay Leadership & Operations
  - Many of us are concerned about the lack of new people in lay leadership roles.
  - Some who are not in leadership roles worry that the leadership space is not open to them.
  - Those currently serving in leadership roles wish to share leadership and worry about burnout and/or fear for the future of the church as they know they cannot serve indefinitely.
  - A few expressed a concern that the Board operates with too much of a centralized decision-making model, leaving out the voices of others in the congregation.



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)



## Callings / Dreams

- Many of us feel strongly called to share God's love by continuing to reach out to the community in which we are located.
- Some of us are interested in exploring how our church can meet present-day needs for faith and community, to make sense of the time we are living in, and to leave Sunday morning services feeling inspired.
- We wonder about how to enhance our engagement with children and youth in worship and/or how to strengthen our all-ages worship services. We recognise we need more leaders for our youth. We wonder about how to enhance our programs for youth (possibly in collaboration with other congregations).
- A few of us dream about making changes to the church building to be more environmentally friendly, user friendly and accessible, including the addition of more washrooms. Some of us think about modifying our sanctuary seating (so that it is not fixed) to allow for more flexibility and to allow the building to be a stronger hub for the community.
- With the Universities and a College nearby, we wonder about whether there is a ministry opportunity there for us (games night, food, etc.), recognising that these young adults may only be a part of us for a short time before they move away.
- Some of us long for a kinder and stronger community at First United. We wonder about how the multiple "circles" that make up First United can be brought together. We wonder about how to build trust with one another. We recognise that we would do well to strengthen the lines of communication within First United.
- A number of us long for more opportunities to talk about spirituality and to have conversations that are more vulnerable in nature.
- Many of us long for a common vision for our congregation: Who are we? Why are we here?



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)



## Listening, Praying & Discerning

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

### Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

### Week 1 - Invitation to Silence and Solitude

Now during those days, Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. Luke 6:12

In this time of social distancing and self-isolation, it may seem strange to encourage silence and solitude. After all, we are told to stay in regular contact with one another, whether by email, letter or phone, in order to avoid loneliness. Loneliness is different than solitude. Loneliness is about being disconnected from others – even when we are with them. Solitude is about being intentionally alone with oneself in order to come nearer to both ourselves and to God. When we do this, it is easier to meaningfully connect with others and it is easier to align ourselves with God's will rather than our own.

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. What is your experience of solitude and silence?
2. How do you experience God's transforming presence during the practice of silence and solitude?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the "What we think we know" document, what do you hear God saying?



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)





## Listening, Praying & Discerning

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

### Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

### Week 2 (April 5, 2020 – April 11, 2020) – Prayer of Acceptance

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

A kernel of wisdom from the world of personal transformation is this: "The feelings we resist, we entrench." When we resist our feelings of pain, sorrow or anxiety, we tend to make them stronger. It is when we accept our feelings exactly as they are that they lose their power over us and we can chart a different or more confident way forward. (This is good advice also in this time of COVID-19). Similarly, when we deny our congregation's current reality or regard our current reality with judgement, it can cause us either to long for the "good old days" or to seek someone to blame for our situation. Consider the following saying: "We change because God loves us, not in order to win God's love." Said somewhat differently: "The church will change because we love it, not to win our love." During this week, focus on accepting and loving the congregation – in all of its manifestations – exactly as it is right now.

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. What are you being invited to accept about First United that might be hard for you to do?
2. What shifts within you as you practice accepting First United as it is?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the "What we think we know" document, what do you hear God saying?



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)

50 Ottawa Street S., Suite 346, Kitchener, ON N2G 3S7  
519.883.8906 • [info@credenceandco.com](mailto:info@credenceandco.com)





## Listening, Praying & Discerning

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. In prayer, we are coming intentionally near to God to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen in order to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

### Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

### Week 3 – Prayer of Release

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Luke 23:46

In this Easter season, we become familiar with Jesus' voice crying out to God. This cry is not the cry of one who has given up. Instead, it is the cry of release into God's hands. What is the difference between giving up and release? In truth, these two stances are similar to one another. Giving up and release both mean surrendering our need to have things go our way. They both mean letting go of our attachment to how we want things to be (or, to how we don't want things to be, but we are attached to these things nonetheless.) BUT... giving up has a sense of coercion about it – someone or something has beaten us down to surrender. Release maintains a sense of choice. It is not that God has beaten Jesus down; nor actually has the Roman state, the disciples or the Pharisees. Jesus, while loving his detractors – even through his pain, reaches for the hands of God wherein he knows he will find welcome, grace and rest. How do we follow Jesus on this path?

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. During this strange COVID-19 time we are in, what would resting in God's arms look like for you?
2. What would it look like for First United to release itself into God's care? What attachments could First United release in order to more fully recognise itself as living in God's caring embrace?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the “What we think we know” document, what do you hear God saying?



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)

50 Ottawa Street S., Suite 346, Kitchener, ON N2G 3S7  
519.883.8906 • [info@credenceandco.com](mailto:info@credenceandco.com)



## Listening, Praying & Discerning

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

### Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

### Week 4 – Prayer of Wonder

They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” Matthew 8:27

It was only a few years ago that I learned that the weeks following Easter are sometimes considered the weeks of Holy Hilarity in the Christian calendar. This is where the release associated with Good Friday and the joy of resurrection come together in a type of holy and joyous wonder. It is like breathing out after so much time breathing in. It is like taking in – really taking in – the ongoing wonder of the resurrection after so much time in the gloom of death. (For me, raised in Manitoba, it is like seeing Spring sprouts and actually believing that summer is possible after a winter of -35C temps.)

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. What does “breathing out” feel like for you personally at this time? In the post-Easter season, what do holy and joyous wonder feel like for you? (Sometimes, the season is not in sync with our own life circumstances. When that occurs, we allow others to carry the spirit of the season for us, until we are in sync with the season again.)
2. What does it mean for First United to embrace the possibility of holy hilarity, of joy and wonder?
3. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the “What we think we know” document, what do you hear God saying?



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)



## Listening, Praying & Discerning

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

### Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

### Week 5 – Prayer of Trust

“Be still and know that I am God!” Psalm 46:10

The words of this Psalm are frequently used during prayer as a way of inviting us to remember that God is present, and that God is trustworthy. And while we are not God, it is also true that God lives within each one of us, in the world at large, and in the congregation. As a result, when we pray the words of this Psalm, it is appropriate to visualize God speaking to us from within ourselves, from outside of ourselves, from within the larger world and from within the congregation. Some people sing the well-known hymn associated with these words as a way of entering into prayer. Others pray these words in the following sequence: 1) *Be still and know that I am God.* 2) *Be still and know that I am.* 3) *Be still and know.* 4) *Be still.* 5) *Be.* However you wish to come near to these words this week, allow these words to seep into you and to guide your time of prayer. (For me personally, this feels like good advice especially as our culture wrestles with the COVID-19 pandemic).

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. Repeat or hum the Psalmist's words as a way of entering into prayer.
2. How do you experience the word, trust? What does it mean for you personally to trust in God?
3. What does it mean for First United to trust that God is leading First United in discerning its future?
4. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the “What we think we know” document, what do you hear God saying?



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)



## Listening, Praying & Discerning

We are coming together as a congregation to listen for how God is calling and leading First United Church, Waterloo. We spend time in prayer to intentionally come near to God and to loosen our attachment to what we want to see happen. When this occurs, we develop the muscle required to listen for God's call for the congregation. Prayer is like going to the gym for our souls: While we may sense God's direction during our time of prayer, it is just as (or more) likely that the answers to the questions we are posing will come while we are not in prayer.

### Overarching questions First United Church is asking:

- God – how are you calling us to deepen our relationship with you – and with one another?
- What are you calling us to release and/or embrace?
- How are you calling us as a church? To what actions are you calling us? What is our witness in this community?

### Week 6 – Prayer for Wisdom

“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” James 1:5

Wisdom can often feel far away. How do we find the way forward – especially when we are in unknown territory? When the church (or any of us individually) seeks renewal, we typically look for wisdom to guide the way. The problem is that renewal depends on the openness to be transformed and to be changed – something that is very difficult to do until transformation and change are thrust upon us (and even then, it can be difficult.) During this pandemic, we have been forced to change – how we do church, how we celebrate the Easter season, how we relate to one another... For some of us, embracing this change will have been easy. For others, it will have been difficult, for multiple reasons. And for many of us, we will have experienced this change like a series of waves – sometimes easy and sometimes tough. During times of transformation and change, we are invited to lean on God for wisdom, assured that God gives both generously and ungrudgingly.

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 – 20 minutes per day in intentional silence, as we have outlined in the prayer overview. Outside of this time, consider the following questions:

1. How have you experienced the changes brought on by the pandemic? How have you leaned on God during this time? What wisdom is emerging for you personally during this time of change?
2. As you reflect on the overarching First United questions above, and the “What we think we know” document, and as you lean on God, what do you hear God saying – what wisdom is emerging for First United?



[credenceandco.com](http://credenceandco.com)