



LISTENING FIRST

Reflections on our Discernment Journey

Keith Grant on behalf of the Board | Spring 2022

For all the common themes and priorities that we heard during the many discernment conversations that we hosted over the winter months, I think one of my favourite moments was a disagreement.

As we did at every small “fireside chat,” the kick-off question was whether anyone had an image that came to mind when thinking about The Journey Church in this season or as we’d like to see it in the next few years. One participant thoughtfully offered the image of a *tree* to describe the church. People rooted and growing in discipleship, bearing fruit in season. A welcoming image of shade. Branches reaching out in perhaps surprising directions. There were lots of nods of agreement and recognition around the (virtual) room. One person reflected that integrating new members from the community was like grafting in new branches. Someone else recited some lines from Psalm 1 (“... like a tree planted by streams of water ...”).

Just as it seemed we had reached a leafy consensus about the tree as an image for our church, another participant spoke up – hesitantly at first, but then with conviction – confessing that as beautiful as the image is, for her, the image of a tree didn’t capture this congregation’s story. Rather, she proposed, the church is more like a *journey*. A movie more than a painting. What’s over this next hill? As the church goes down the road, what challenges or adventures will we encounter? How do we map and remap our route, how do we encourage each other to keep going, what does it mean to keep walking together? Nods around the Zoom screen this time, too, as others recognized resonances with this other, also deeply biblical metaphor, and with their own ... journey.

So, which of them was right? Of course, we didn’t need to vote or choose between them. Both images, especially when so thoughtfully rendered, captured important truths about our church’s story and how we hope the next chapters might unfold. Both participants drew the images from scripture and applied them to our context. The conversation came out of prayer and led us back into prayer, the group listened attentively to one another, and I think we all understood The Journey Church better than when we had started. This was the beginning of a good discernment conversation.

Our Discernment Journey

In the late summer of 2021, even as the Board was attempting to navigate the ever-changing pandemic situation, Pastor Dave shared with us that he was starting to think about retirement, though not necessarily with a specific timeline in mind. 2021 also marked an incredible 35 years of ministry for Dave and Nancy. With such a long and formative leadership, we knew that the church would need to be very intentional and prayerful about what will be an important period of transition for all of us – a generational change for our church.

As a Board, we began to think and pray about what it would mean to develop what we called a *transition mindset* – recognizing that **this would be about more than only the choice of a new pastor (as crucial**

as that will be) but also a season of changes, opportunities, and ripple effects. We began to read and discuss Susan Beaumont's aptly-titled book, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*.

We also decided that we would take the first few months of 2022 for a congregational focus on discernment. **We had two goals for this process. First, we wanted to help the congregation to be spiritually prepared to listen to God and each other when it came time to make a decision about a new pastor. Second, we saw this as a discipleship training opportunity – to help people learn how to listen to God and each other when they are making decisions in their own lives – the spiritual practice of discernment.** We asked Pastor Sarah Cogswell to be our shepherd for this process, to be our congregational discernmentarian (a play on parliamentarian).

From early February to late March, the Board hosted a dozen “fireside chats” attended by 60-70 individuals, including targeted meetings with seniors, youth, staff, and the Next Gen Leaders (NGL) group. Several people followed up these conversations with thoughtful emails or submitted an online form. Dozens of people also attended congregational meetings to kick off the discernment journey in January and again in April to reflect on the fireside feedback.



It's important to say clearly that this was a Board-led process, in collaboration with Sarah's teaching on discernment. Pastor Dave's role in this process was supportive but arms-length. He did not attend any of the fireside chats and did not read the detailed notes. As one participant put it, “I applaud Pastor Dave for being open to this level of vulnerability” – remarkable, when it would be very tempting to be defensive or micromanaging, and we are grateful for his servant leadership in this season of his ministry.

This document shares some of the key themes and priorities that we heard during the last months of conversations. We took detailed notes during each fireside chat and large-group meeting, and several times talked about the themes that were being repeated and emphasized. What follows is a summary and analysis of those themes, often including the insightful comments that people shared.

Discerning *before* Deciding

One church member said this about the discernment process: **“I am thankful that we are doing this in advance, with lots of time for a thoughtful change, rather than going into panic mode at the last minute.”** That's exactly what we were hoping for! Over the coming months, we will have important and concrete decisions to make: forming a search committee, writing a job description, inviting candidates to visit, asking the right questions, deciding who to call.

Before we make those decisions, we want to listen. This discernment journey has allowed us to listen to each other and to reflect on where we are at this moment in our church's ministry. It's also been an opportunity to cultivate the spiritual practices that we will draw upon when we're in the thick of decision making.

Embracing the In-Between

As many people commented during our conversations, change is uncomfortable. We would much rather stay with the familiar or start defining the new. The in-between? Not our favourite place! After all, who likes being unsettled or uncertain? Who likes letting go of the old while the new is not yet within our reach? Who likes feeling disoriented or loves waiting?

Yet these in-between times are also important turning-points in the life of our church. During times of transition, we can step back and be honest about who we are and what we're doing and why. In the words of one member, we can "revisit what we are doing and why we are doing it." We can let go of some things. We can decide that other things are worth hanging on to. We realize how much we depend upon God's Spirit. We can be open to new possibilities. We can reorient ourselves and set course for the next stage of the journey.

God has work to do in our hearts and in our church during this in-between, unsettled season. So, rather than simply rushing forward, let's take the time we need to listen first. Let's embrace this season of transition over the coming months, and commit ourselves to a spirit of listening, honesty, love, adaptation, and hope.

Discipleship, Biblical Teaching, and Spiritual Formation

It is foundational that The Journey Church will be seeking a new leader who will nurture a **culture of discipleship and spiritual formation**, grounded in the teachings of the Bible. Loving God and each other is central to who we are.

To be able to do this work, it is important that the pastor is a person of **deep and authentic Christian faith**, a person of prayer, someone "mature in faith" who is "sensitive to the Spirit."

We will be looking for a leader who can maintain some important **balances** in their preaching and ministry:

- A preacher who has strong, clear biblical beliefs *but* who is not dogmatic.
- A teacher who adheres to a core of Christian doctrine, *and* who can address our contemporary culture with relevance.
- A leader who connects love for the church community *and* the church's mission to the world.

Community Outreach

The Journey Church has a strong sense of local community outreach and mission. It is a priority that we are reaching our neighbours with the gospel, finding faithful ways to be relevant and growing.

People are very aware of the **challenges and opportunities** for engaging in this kind of mission, and so we are seeking a new leader who continues the church's focus on innovative, creative ministry. We know that society's perceptions of churches are not always positive, and so we want to be a church that is welcoming and not judgmental. We know that technology brings people together but can also isolate them. And, of course, we know that the pandemic has changed the social and religious landscape in ways we are still trying to understand and adapt to.

Many participants were excited about **partnerships** in our broader community, joining other community organizations and churches, rather than doing things only on our own. Whether school breakfast programs, refugee settlement, neighbourhood outreach, or regional associations, there was a sense in which collaboration with other community groups would make TJC more visible and build a greater web of connections.

Belonging and (Re)connection

The pandemic has reminded us all how important community is to our spiritual journey. The very first comment shared at a fireside chat was about the absolute necessity of cultivating a community of **BELONGING** in the church.

We want more than a friendly-but-superficial community: we want **authenticity**. Time and again, people expressed a longing for church relationships that are *real*, where there is more than a façade of niceness. An authentic church would encourage people to actually get to know each other in homes and small groups, to be vulnerable and real about the struggles in their lives, and to go deeper as spiritual companions. In a true community, people “create friendships and do life together” from a place of honesty, freely admitting that “we are not perfect and don’t have it all together.” It was often (though not only!) the youth and young adults who made this point. Cultivating an authentic community, where everyone can be real, is perhaps one of the most important things we can do to reach our neighbours, too; in a time when many people are sceptical about religion and anything smacking of judgmentalism, this is the kind of community that newcomers would find winsome and welcoming.

One repeatedly mentioned theme was a desire to become a **more diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural** congregation. As our local communities become more diverse, the hope is that our church would intentionally reach out to and be a welcoming place for people of many different cultural backgrounds. How can the face of the congregation – both in the pews and on the stage – reflect the beautiful diversity of our community? As one participant put it, “In heaven, we will be celebrating together. How can we begin that now?”



Next Generations (and Inter-generational Community)

People of every age and demographic – seniors, young parents, youth themselves –emphasized how important it is that we are empowering the next generations in our church and community. We envision this happening in many different ways: ministry to children and families, supporting faith at home, hosting dynamic youth and young adult ministries, having the pastor involved in mentoring next-gen leaders, providing meaningful opportunities for service in the community, and creating the kind of authentic community that youth find engaging. Youth themselves are very invested in who the senior pastor will be.

While people of every age emphasized how important it was to have a focus on next generations, there was also a strong desire that The Journey Church be an **inter-generational community**. “There’s so much blessing in an intergenerational community – when the older and younger serve and learn and share life

alongside each other.” One participant noted that there can be a temptation for age-based groups or demographics to become a bit siloed in church ministry rather than interacting with each other, but she and others mentioned many examples of how meaningful it has been for them when there were opportunities for people of different ages to mentor and learn from each other, in formal and informal ways. Others mentioned how important it is to see a diversity of ages and backgrounds represented on the Sunday morning platform and in positions of leadership – helping everyone relate and feel they have a place.

Equipping the Whole Church for Ministry

The Journey Church has a culture of every-member ministry: that **all of us (and not just a few paid staff) are called by God to serve in the world and in the church**. The role of pastors is therefore to equip the church for that our ministry – in our workplaces, families, and neighbourhoods, and as part of church ministries. Serving is a part of our discipleship and often the way we encounter God and grow deeper in our faith. We’re looking for a new lead pastor who shares this vision.

It is worth lingering here to underline how difficult the pandemic has been on this culture of equipping and volunteer service. For much of the last two years, people were distanced from their neighbours, working from home, not able to gather for worship and fellowship. By necessity, we relied on paid pastoral staff to run our remaining programs. We are only now slowly seeing people reconnect with their habits of service and volunteer ministry. It will take time to re-establish these mindsets and habits, both now and once a new lead pastor is in place.

One Church, Three Neighbourhoods

The Journey Church is somewhat unique in our region for taking a multi-site approach to church, rather than only attempting to develop the original site. The motivation for this has been a redemptive approach to sister churches who were struggling to maintain a viable, healthy ministry in their neighbourhoods. TJC and the people in those congregations in the Brentwood and Riverview communities believed that something new could happen for the gospel in those neighbourhoods. As a long-time member of the Riverview campus put it, their congregation was dying but they believe that becoming a part of The Journey Church offers the possibility of new life: “Our vision was to see the church full, to have it full of kids, a testimony of activity in the community.”

It was apparent that people approached the question of multi-site ministry differently depending on their location and time as part of TJC. Those who might have been part of the church when these decisions were made were more likely to be aware of the vision behind them, and to be more committed to the opportunities for mission. Some are only familiar with one location and its interests, while others knew many people and had a sense of community across each campus. Some people focused on the story or needs of a particular campus, while others thought about TJC as a single community.

The decision to be one church in three neighbourhoods is not the easy way. But it’s a vision that is motivated by a desire to have a strong, vital ministry presence in these neighbourhoods. It’s complicated, and may not look like what we think, but it’s worth it. As one participant put it, **“We prayed hard about this decision and felt led to it, and I believe God is going to do something. And that’s why I’m sticking around.”**

Digital Ministry: Opportunities and Challenges

This is a church that has a long history of being innovative and relevant in how we communicate outside the church walls, and how we use technology to enhance worship and other ministry experiences. Pandemic

lockdowns pushed us, like many other churches, to take our use of technology to another level so that we could foster personal connections during a time of physical distancing.

By using some of the Brentwood campus building as a digital studio, by investing in some new equipment, and especially thanks to the vision and tireless labour of a handful of staff and volunteers, we have been able to produce a consistently high-quality **online worship, teaching, and community experience. It's been a lifeline for those who could not attend in-person services. But it has also been an important form of mission beyond pandemic needs.** It has allowed people with non-Covid health or mobility issues to stay connected and spiritually fed. It has provided some flexibility for shift workers and those travelling for work. It has provided spiritual nurture for people living beyond our community, some of whom have since moved to the area and joined the fellowship. And it has been a meaningful way of connecting with younger generations who are so at home in cyberspace; ignoring the digital would to a great extent cut us off from many of our younger neighbours.

To be sure, there are still tensions to work out and questions to ponder, some of them during this period of building back after the pandemic and some of them over the longer term. As participants in the fireside chats noted, **as a church we want to be present in the online spaces where so younger people spend so much of their time, and we want to provide in-person spaces where people can build communal habits and authentic relationships.** That is, we want to be both culturally relevant *and* provide a cultural alternative. And as we continue to wrestle with that tension and try to get the balance right, that will help us to answer questions about the sustainable and wise use of volunteer and staff time, facilities, and resources.

A Leader as well as a Pastor.

Individuals in many of our conversations emphasized that we should be seeking someone who is **a leader as well as a pastor.** This came up in several different ways. A leader at TJC will need to be “a visionary and planner,” who will be able to shepherd us through the next chapter of ministry. We are in a challenging and complex moment for ministry – rebuilding after the pandemic, trying to understand changes in our culture, attempting to be relevant to those looking for hope – and many people commented on the kind of cultural intelligence and creativity that will be required to chart a course through these times.

Others observed that a church of the size and complexity of The Journey Church will require a strong but sensitive leader, someone who is gifted in guiding an organization and its layers of leadership. While experience with this kind of complex leadership would certainly be an asset, most likely it is even more important that the future pastor is skilled at collaboration and communication, and who thrives in complexity.

At the same time, the church is not just any organization, and so it was regularly pointed out that this leader will indeed need to be a pastor with the heart of a shepherd. While in a church this size, pastoral care is a shared ministry – involving other staff members and the whole congregation – members of all ages mentioned how important it was that the lead pastor be caring, compassionate, relatable, and interested in their lives.

Thankfully, people also realized that this is a “unique combination of gifts.” Indeed, there was often nervous laughter as people admitted that expectations for a pastor can be unrealistic. Since the spiritual and personal health of the pastor matters so much to so many people, there were often comments about the need to keep the expectations more sustainable and the leadership well-supported. Others observed that not all the leadership roles can or should be embodied in a single lead pastor – that’s why we have a team!

Servant Leadership and Team Ministry

The Journey Church has for years taken a **team approach to pastoral ministry**. Uniquely among peer churches, we have nurtured a host of “home grown” leaders – recognizing and training members of the church to lead ministries for which they have a passion. This has given us a large staff of part-time paid and volunteer leaders – one of the things that gives our church a sense of dynamism. It’s also a unique and complex environment for a new lead pastor to step into.

Over and over in our conversations this winter, people commented on how essential it was for a new lead pastor to have the capacity to lead as part of a ministry team, to be able to “trust other voices and team members.” We know that this is a rare set of qualities – to be a strong, innovative leader who is also willing to hear the voices of others, to be secure enough to seek out other perspectives and to appreciate the gifts of other leaders. To be sure, it will take time to develop the deep trust that makes a team thrive, but we’ll be looking for someone who has this combination of leadership, collaboration, and humility. In other words, a “servant leader.”

This will be a significant transition for the rest of the ministry staff. This is not only a period of discernment for Pastor Dave and the congregation; it is also a season during which many other members of the pastoral team will be doing their own discernment, thinking about what this change means for them. We can also expect some changes and realignments of roles over the next months or couple of years, as the change of lead pastor creates ripple effects through the team, as leaders discern the best way to work together given the new dynamics and different gifts. **This is a normal, expected part of this transition.** One staff member said, “in typical TJC fashion, we’ll adapt ourselves around the person we find the Lord leads to us.” We can support the team by praying for each of them and encouraging them in their ministry. As another staff member put it, “God has a plan for everyone—not just the lead pastor. ... This is a discerning time for *all* of the staff.”

Next steps?

Thank you for walking with us during this stage of our discernment journey. We are so grateful for your participation and that you shared your hearts, insights, and hopes. The Board and leadership team will continue to reflect on and discuss these and the other points that were raised during these conversations.

At the Annual General Meeting in June, you can expect to learn more about a pastoral search committee. As this group is assembled, under the leadership of the Board, they will take the summer and probably early autumn to build their team, map out their documents and processes, and how they will continue to communicate with the congregation.

As we move closer to decisions and transitions, *let’s keep listening first* – listening to each other with grace, and especially listening to the voice of the Lord.

“It’s going to take grace,” said one participant. “People tend not to like change, but we will need to be open minded.” **Most of all, as another member said, “We need to hear God as he directs us.”**

To share your feedback on this document and the discernment journey, you are welcome to get in touch with us at theboard@onthejourney.ca.

