



CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL INTERIM REPORT *for conversation*

SUBMITTED TO: Hope Springs United Church

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Introduction & Background

In Winter 2023, Hope Springs United Church (Hope Springs) appointed Credence to support Hope Springs with a Renewal Process. Through this process, Hope Springs hopes to hear diverse perspectives among congregants, engage in important faith-based conversations, delight in how God has been present through the amalgamation, and listen for God's calling for Hope Springs' future. The Renewal Process is being supported by a Reference Group (RG).

The interim report is based on the notes provided by the RG from 13 Community Listening Groups (CLG), interviews with 4 staff members, conversations with the RG, the congregational dialogue on April 16, committee interviews with the Ministry and Personnel Committee, and the Mission and Stewardship Committees, alongside individual submissions from congregants. This report is intended to provide a picture of the current reality of the congregation. *Given the resources used to produce this document, the reflections regarding Hope Springs are written in first person.*

Identity & Strengths

- Hope Springs is a newly amalgamated congregation located in the growing town of Elora, drawing congregants from three founding congregations: Alma, Bethany, and Elora United Churches. The name of the new congregation, Hope Springs United Church, expresses our hope and vitality sparked by the amalgamation.
- As a congregation, we seek to follow the energy God is igniting at Hope Springs. We value the gifts so many have brought to this congregation and seek to grow in our fellowship and connections with one another. We value that we are a community of all ages, where children, youth, adults, and seniors have a place to belong. We love gathering to worship God, celebrate with music, and share food together.
- We are encouraged by the faithfulness and hope expressed through our amalgamation. We are excited to feel the energy that comes with being among more people and the enthusiasm that has been sparked by our coming together. We are curious to see where God is leading us and to what community initiatives God will call us.
- We cherish our multi-generational congregation that, with renewed energy, gathers to worship God with music, food, and excellent leadership. We value being in a space where all ages are welcomed, where rural and town life come together, and where hope abides. We are thrilled to be part of a congregation that includes many generations. The buzz in Sunday mornings is wonderful.
- We are aligned with and a part of the United Church of Canada and provide a generous-hearted, curious, open-minded, family-friendly, inclusive, and informal community of faith.

- We are excited about the people we know and the people we are getting to know through Hope Springs. There are many wonderful people who are calling Hope Springs home – including some who have come to Hope Springs following the amalgamation. We are committed to being a church of welcome. We are gentle with one another.
- We are grateful for our ministers and staff. We believe that, in part, we are thriving because of our leaders.
 - We appreciate our minister for his dedication, work ethic, approachability, and engaging presence each Sunday.
 - We appreciate our designated lay minister for her creativity and care, as she connects with children, youth, and young families.
 - We appreciate our staff – our music director, administrator, custodian, and bookkeeper – for all the ways they serve Hope Springs with dedication.

Demographics & Attendance

- Our church includes approximately 140 adults and 30 children and youth.
- Our congregation tends to be middle class, working or retired from a variety of jobs: professional, agricultural, manufacturing and artistry.
- Our children and youth value the chance to be known and connected, are welcome to move about on Sunday morning amidst adults and seniors who appreciate their presence.
- We are a typical small-town congregation where many consider us their church even if they attend only every month or two.
- The pandemic has influenced Hope Springs in a variety of ways. We formed our new congregation in November of 2022, after more than two years navigating the pandemic.
- We worship in a hybrid fashion – with some present in the building physically, some attending virtually, and some attending in our “seniors satellite church” at Heritage River Retirement Residence, where residents gather weekly to participate in a live worship feed.

Opportunities, Callings and Dreams

- We want to build on our new energy and are open to doing things differently than before. We are motivated to develop our sense of mission, vision, and values – especially as it comes to our sense of direction following our amalgamation. We wonder who we want to be and how to use our resources. We are longing for a clear sense of vision to direct our decision-making.
- We have mixed feelings about our building, and we are uncertain about our ability to maintain it. We could be using the building more creatively. We wonder how we might be able to re-envision this space to better serve the congregation and the community. Our parking is limited, especially during the tourist season. We recognise that this makes it hard for some to come to our church.

- Church expenses exceed giving. Finances cause us to be concerned for our future financial sustainability. We are aware that we are presenting a deficit budget each year. While we do not have any debts and own our church building, we wonder whether there are creative ideas that could help us with our finances.
- Some of our outreach is led by small group of people. How do we build a common sense of mission and outreach? While our church building is in Elora, we are the church in Elora, Bethany and Alma. How do we imagine our outreach as being in all three of these locations?
- Some of our people are tired – following the hard work of amalgamation, Covid, busy personal lives, etc. Exhaustion impacts people’s ability to volunteer and to attend various events. Our larger society is also tired and increasingly polarized. There is a sense that people are carrying significant amounts of stress. How do we support and strengthen one another? How do we deepen the health of our community?
- We struggle to talk to each other about our faith and are aware that being better at this can be helpful for us. We long to deepen our faith, to be strengthened spiritually, and to share with one another more deeply regarding our experiences of God’s presence in our lives. We long for Hope Springs to be a place where we nurture encounters with God’s presence.
- Like many congregations, we would benefit from developing practices for honouring and working through differences of perspective, especially when we are engaging big questions.
- We wonder: How do we support our minister to be able to thrive in long-term ministry, to nurture his gifts without spreading him too thin? As our needs grow, how do we shift from relying on our minister to be involved in all that we do, to share in the leadership responsibilities as a congregation?
- We wonder: How do we support our children and youth ministries, to allow Hope Springs to become the kind of place where young people find a place for them, grow in their faith, and are supported by a community? How we do we invest in our youth ministry?
- We appreciate opportunities to get to know one another better and long to continue this as we become more connected.
- We are motivated to be a place of connection, meaning, and community for those in the Centre Wellington area and are seeking to discern how do we invite people to participate in Hope Springs. We want to share the good thing we have going and invite the wider community, to experience the warmth, informality and welcome that we love at Hope Springs. We are uncertain how to act on this longing.

Perspectives from Sister Congregations

To support Hope Springs with its renewal work, Credence interviewed leaders from two sister congregations, both of whom were recently formed through amalgamations.

Congregation 1: Congregation 1 began the process of amalgamation in Spring 2020. Two small congregations, only 10 minutes apart, had recently lost their Minister whom they shared (the churches were not a 2-point charge). The pandemic brought the sustainability of one of the congregations into focus, leading to the request for amalgamation. Together, the new congregation includes approximately 35 – 40 people with enough children to host a small Sunday School. The sale of one of the founding church's buildings has helped the amalgamated church pay its bills. The congregation has ensured people from both founding churches are on leadership committees.

Amalgamation was not without pain: One of the founding congregations mourned the loss of its building. One congregation found the work of amalgamation exhausting. Despite these challenges, the congregation is thrilled with its new, amalgamated reality. Several factors have contributed to the congregation's current sense that it is thriving:

- Creating a place of belonging and joy has been the congregation's focus. A good spirit has emerged at the church: People support one another through the joys and challenges of life. The congregation has committed to regular communication to keep people connected and informed, to offering personal touches to help people belong. For example, leaders set up a phone tree, so people are made aware of prayer requests, invitations for activities and other pertinent information.
- The congregation takes initiatives to be present in the surrounding community (outdoor services, signs, dinners, rentals).
- People have stepped up – there is a renewed energy of participation – in the service, at coffee hour, with Sunday School.
- With amalgamation completed and a sense of belonging in place the congregation will now begin talking about ministry initiatives and to reimagine its mission.
- The congregation has a new minister who loves the congregation; the congregation loves the new minister. She is described as a perfect fit for the congregation, bringing joyful energy to the church. People are saying: "We just love it here."

Congregation 2: Congregation 2 began the process of amalgamation in Fall 2021, though the congregations had been discussing this possibility for some time. The amalgamation brought together two congregations that already functioned as a two-point charge. One of the two congregations was elderly, rural and small. The village around the church had disappeared over time. The smaller

congregation was comfortable being absorbed into the larger congregation which was also actively working with a sense of vision and purpose. Members from both congregations were invited into leadership roles though because of age, the smaller congregation was not as interested in being in leadership roles. They did, however, join committees. Funds from the sale of the smaller church have been used to upgrade the sanctuary of the amalgamated church. The sanctuary has been named after the smaller congregation. Today, the congregation describes itself as strong and vibrant with a congregation of approximately 150 people.

The congregation describes the following:

- The congregation was and remains committed to honouring the legacy of both congregations while birthing something new.
- Even without amalgamation, the church has been growing, in part because of the public profile the pandemic gave the congregation (through its online services).
- To have a larger-church mindset and accommodate the larger numbers attending, the church has hired an additional staff person (as program director).
- The Minister has worked to create a joyful, “holy hubbub” on Sunday mornings, greeting people for 40 minutes in the Sanctuary prior to worship. This contributes to people saying hello to one another, including strangers. Coffee hour, programs for families with young children – all of these have helped create a community of welcome.

Advice for newly amalgamated congregations: “Amalgamation is not fruitful so long as it is only bringing dying congregations together. It needs to be a vision driven; something new. People have to be drawn to the new.”