

Dear friends,

On September 12, at the meeting organized to discuss our proposed new home, over 100 members of our community shared their questions and thoughts about the proposal. In this process, they experienced a profoundly important conversation. This letter from your Ministers and your Board is an expression of our commitment to continue that conversation and to appreciate the lessons it holds.

In the meeting, some congregants expressed concern about crime and gang activity in the Oakwood/Vaughan area. The ensuing conversation pointed to the importance of understanding the lenses through which we each think about safety: Safety from what? and, safety for whom?

Our congregants come from all over and everyone has a right to feel safe at First. It is a hard truth that crime of all kinds exists throughout our city. Oakwood/Vaughan rates are similar to city-wide; the statistics are available online. In the meeting, we heard from congregants who live nearby and feel completely safe going about their lives among their neighbours. We also heard from congregants who spoke about the privilege of worrying about street crime in diverse, mixed income neighbourhoods, but feel comfortable attending services in an upper income neighbourhood, where white-collar crime and systemic racism can both hide and play out in clear sight. Even statistics have a certain lens; they don't tell us about the biases and microaggressions that put some people at risk while others feel safe, regardless of neighbourhood. We heard from people of colour who felt at risk while speaking their truth about these issues, and who know their friends would not feel safe at First's current location.

We also heard suggestions for how to enter a new community, using outreach and advertising, and letting people know what we have to offer. Then we heard about listening first, learning first, and working humbly to be invited to tables already set by residents and community groups.

There have been many reasons to use the phrase "we are not a building" in recent years. By purchasing a building, we enter into a neighbourhood which may or may not be different from where we live, while definitely different from our current congregational home. The act of re-planting our congregation is far more real than any theoretical conversation or workshop. If we are fortunate enough to have found our new home, let's meet our new neighbours with gratitude, humility and joy while appreciating the broad lens we'll need to understand what it means to feel safe and welcome at First.

We are committed to bringing our stated values to the real work of moving and growing this congregation, and we are open to learning more about what that truly means. Let's do this life changing work together.

Shawn, Lynn, and your Board of Trustees