

Independent Consultation: Terms of Reference

Independent Consultation on the Draft Religious Inclusion Action Plan

Consultant: Anne Comfort

Project Lead: Elizabeth Yeo, designated by President Hakin to Chair the Religious Inclusion Working Group

Project Team: Religious Inclusion Working Group (RIWG)

Timeline: November 2025 – February 15, 2026

1. Purpose

To conduct an independent and confidential consultation process to gather feedback on the Draft Religious Inclusion Action Plan. The purpose of this consultation is to ensure that diverse perspectives — including Catholic, ecumenical, other faith traditions, and non-faith or philosophical worldviews— are meaningfully heard and reflected before the plan is finalized and presented for institutional endorsement.

Catholic heritage and character are affirmed as institutional commitments under the University Act and By-Laws. These commitments sit alongside StFX’ s responsibility, as a public institution, to cultivate an inclusive environment that welcomes and supports people of all religious, spiritual, and non-faith or philosophical worldviews.

The consultant’s work will surface areas of alignment, tension, and divergence; provide evidence-informed analysis of the feedback received; and identify options or considerations for St. Francis Xavier University’s leadership as it moves forward with implementation.

The process will be designed to ensure that participants can express the full range of views, including diverse interpretations of how the university’s heritage commitments and public mission should be reflected in policies, programs, and ceremonies.

The consultant’s role is to reflect community perspectives, not revise the Action Plan. Their findings will inform the Executive Committee as it reviews the plan and develops the Implementation Framework. The consultation will focus on experiences and communication of the university’s heritage traditions in campus life and ceremonies, while recognizing that the substance of the university’s heritage obligations, as defined in governing documents, is not within scope.

The consultation will be conducted in two stages:

- an advance sharing period, during which draft materials are made available to identified stakeholders for early review and reflection; and
- a formal community consultation period, during which written submissions and meetings with the consultant are invited more broadly.

2. Context

The Religious Inclusion Working Group (RIWG) has developed a Draft Religious Inclusion Action Plan. The plan is designed to:

- honour the University's Catholic heritage, as articulated in the StFX University Act ;
- meet the standards of a public institution, ensuring alignment with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; and
- strengthen inclusion, religious literacy, and spiritual wellness across academic, workplace, and community life at StFX.

The consultation will not reconsider the heritage-related obligations established in the university's governing documents; however, it may explore how the expression and communication of these commitments—particularly in ceremonies and public events—can best support a welcoming, inclusive, and contemporary university community. The consultation acknowledges that ceremonial inclusion is an area of diverse opinion, and the consultant will ensure these perspectives are heard in a balanced and confidential manner.

The consultation will seek to test and refine the plan's recommendations across four key areas:

- 1) Teaching, Learning, and Research Environment
- 2) Working and Organizational Environment
- 3) Living and Social Environment (including ceremonial inclusion and multifaith support)
- 4) Community Environment

3. Scope of Work

- 1) Review Background Materials:
 - The Draft Religious Inclusion Action Plan (2025) and supporting documentation.
 - University's governing documents (Articles I and XV)
 - Relevant guiding documents (e.g., the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, PACAR Action Plan, EDIA commitments, CAS Standards).
 - Past minutes, consultation summaries, and correspondence relevant to religious and spiritual inclusion.
- 2) Design and Conduct Consultations:
 - Develop and implement a confidential consultation process, including advance sharing of draft materials with identified stakeholders, followed by a formal consultation period involving interviews, focus groups, and opportunities for written input. All input will be anonymized and reported in aggregate form.
 - Any member of the StFX community who wishes to participate may do so during the formal consultation period through a meeting or written submission. Key stakeholders whose roles relate directly to the university's religious and

spiritual life, as well as those representing diverse communities, will receive specific invitations to contribute. This will include the Vicar of the Founder, the Chair and members of the Board of Governors, the Chaplain and Associate Chaplains, the Ceremonial Officer, staff, student society representatives, and faculty with relevant expertise.

3) Identify and Analyze Key Themes:

- Summarize stakeholder perspectives on the four thematic areas of the plan.
- Highlight areas of consensus, tension, and opportunity.
- Examine how participants interpret the fourth object of the University Act and its relationship to inclusion.
- Pay particular attention to feedback on ceremonial practices.

Participants may comment on their experiences of university ceremonies and on the principles that should guide ceremonial practice at StFX.

- Pay particular attention to how community members value and understand StFX's heritage traditions, and gather suggestions related to communication, context-setting, and clarity.
- Pay particular attention to those who have felt excluded or not represented under current policies and practices

Participants may share perspectives on their experiences of Catholic heritage within campus life, noting strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improved communication or understanding.

4) Develop Options and Considerations:

- Present a synthesis of key findings with analysis of implications for institutional decision-making.
- Offer potential approaches or next steps to strengthen the Action Plan while maintaining alignment with governance, legal, and equity frameworks.

5) Deliver Findings and Recommendations:

- Prepare a confidential report for the President and Executive Committee, summarizing stakeholder perspectives and considerations.
- The report will be shared with Vicar of the Founder (in recognition of Vicar's formal governance responsibilities).
- Provide a summary version for the RIWG to support transparent communication of findings.

4. Thematic Areas for Exploration

- 1) Understanding of the fourth object of the University Act and its meaning in a pluralistic, public university context.
- 2) Perspectives on the proposed actions in teaching, learning, working, and community environments.

- 3) Experiences and expectations of inclusivity, and lack thereof, across religious, spiritual, other faith traditions, and non-faith or philosophical worldviews. .
- 4) Reactions to current ceremonial practices and ideas for how ideas for how heritage traditions and inclusion goals can be expressed can be expressed in ways that are mutually reinforcing.
- 5) The clarity, tone, and perceived balance of the overall Action Plan.
- 6) Implementation considerations — including communication, governance, and change management.

5. Deliverables

Deliverable	Description	Due Date
Consultation plan and advance sharing of consultation materials December 2025	Methodology, final stakeholder list, and confidentiality process, in person and online options, written input invited for those who prefer that method	December, 2025
Consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance sharing of materials with identified stakeholders • Formal consultation period, including on-campus interviews and focus groups • Online and written input accepted • On Campus Meetings 	<p>December</p> <p>January 2–January 15, 2026</p> <p>January 6,7,8</p>
Report	Confidential draft report summarizing themes, concerns, opportunities, and suggestions from stakeholders.	February 10 th , 2026

6. Guiding Principles

- Confidentiality: Individual input will remain confidential and reported in aggregate form; dissenting and strongly held views will be represented accurately and respectfully.
- Balance: Equal consideration will be given to Catholic, ecumenical, other faith traditions, and non-faith or philosophical worldviews Respect and Inclusion: The process will model StFX's values of hospitality, compassion, and social justice.
- Alignment: Analysis will reference the University Act, By-Laws, Human Rights legislation, and CAS Standards.
- Transparency: The staged consultation process, including advance sharing of materials and the formal consultation period, will be clearly communicated to participants and the community.

7. Reporting and Accountability

The consultant will report to the Chair, Religious Inclusion Working Group with updates to the Religious Inclusion Working Group as needed. The consultant's report summary will be shared with members of the Religious Inclusion Working Group for transparency and awareness. While the report will not be reopened for revision, it will provide an important opportunity for the group to see how the consultation findings reflect the themes and priorities we have developed together.

The consultation findings and a revised draft of the Religious Inclusion Action Plan will be shared with PACAR prior to finalization and submission to the Executive Committee, consistent with PACAR's role as the parent committee of the RIWG.

The Religious Inclusion Action Plan (3-4-page version), PACAR final input and the consultant's report will be submitted to the President for review by the Executive Committee and the Vicar of the Founder (in recognition of the Vicar's formal governance responsibilities).

The President or relevant Executive member will seek advice from the Vicar on matters in the report relating to Catholic heritage and character.

The President or relevant Executive member will seek advice from the Human Rights and Equity Office on matters in the report relating to The Charter of Rights and Freedoms and responsibilities as a public institution.

The consultation report and related advice will inform the development of the Implementation and Accountability Plan, including assigned accountabilities and timelines.

*Cas Standards: The CAS Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education) are the most widely adopted quality standards for student affairs and services in North America, used by more than 1,400 higher education institutions across Canada and the United States.

Established in 1979, the CAS Standards provide evidence-informed guidance on program design, equity, accessibility, and student development.

In this consultation, the CAS Standards are used solely as reference points for student experience and inclusion. Religious liturgy or theological content is out of scope.