

The Harcourt Herald December 2023

The Harcourt United Church Community





Harcourt Memorial United Church

An Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Canada

We are a people of God called together and sent forth by Christ to... **Seek. Connect. Act.**

Our Mission: Inspired by the Spirit, we participate in Christian practices that strengthen us in the building of just, compassionate and non-violent relationships.

Our Vision Statement: To be an authentic community of spiritual growth and service.

Our Core Values: Risk... Respect... Responsibility... Vulnerability... Trust

Our Purpose: To welcome and strengthen in community all who wish to serve God and follow the way of Jesus

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The Harcourt Herald is
published 10 times per
year (in paper and
digital formats).

Submission Deadline:
20th of each month.

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From the Desk

It is good to dream, to wish, to imagine what Harcourt could look like in 2024. But actually, my hope for a vibrant congregation is already very well in the making. The Community Hub is doing a great job to make us known in the Guelph community; Manna has its plans ready till Easter, the Worship committee is well and truly alive with new ideas; we just had a wonderful concert given by the choir; and the Spiritual Life Committee is quietly doing its ongoing work accompanying members on their journey with God. We have great leadership working cooperatively. My dream therefore restricts itself to maintaining the energy of the membership.

For the Harcourt Herald, I dream that it continues to benefit from the many lively contributions from readers like you – thus remaining a good communication tool, especially also for people who can not come to the church building anymore.



From Our Minister – Kate Ballagh-Steeper

Perhaps by the time you are reading this, Advent will have begun. It is a church season that invites a different pace of preparation for Christmas and a New Year than the frantic Christmas preparations around us. Church Advent doesn't ask us to buy or purchase anything as part of our preparation. Advent doesn't expect us to bake or cram as many activities in as we can leading up to the 25th. Advent does anticipate a journey that ends in joy. But it is a journey that invites us to acknowledge the realities of our lives and our world and at the same time anticipate the vision of God's kingdom completeness.



The news is bleak and feels somewhat apocalyptic and dystopian. Problems close to home and distant feel too big to be able to offer much in response. Perhaps like me, it is easy to feel very discouraged and wonder where God is. If we follow a God who stretched out arms in love – why does it seem so many die because of violence, hunger, or loneliness? It is easy to soothe myself here in Guelph where I have food aplenty, a warm house, the love of family and a supportive church community. But what of those who don't have life jackets



to cross the Mediterranean just to seek out a life with relative safety or worse, those who watch their children die of hunger or are lost in the rubble of war?

The Advent journey is a time to lift up these laments. There are perhaps no answers to some of these laments. But I do draw some hope in knowing that the world Jesus was born into was also brutal and difficult for many. And in the incarnation – God coming into the world in Jesus - chose to come into the world with the hope of transformation. I do draw some hope knowing that because of the Incarnation, every generation has people of faith whose love has transformed the world. There are families settled and living in Canada because loving people at Harcourt and churches across the country raised money and volunteered time to help settle refugees – for decades. There are children and families who have food on their tables because there are food banks across the city and country – many of which were started by faith communities. Many experiencing homelessness, have places to sleep because churches opened their doors to welcome them in. It may feel like the church and people of faith make little difference when problems feel so large. But without the church, without people of faith and goodwill, how much worse would it be?



I hope you will join us for worship through Advent. We are drawing on resources from the Sanctified Art Collective and the theme is “A Weary World Rejoices”. Advent creates space for lament to encounter hope and to be reminded that we follow the One who is the Light in the darkness. Our journey through Advent reminds us that even a small candle can extinguish the dark if not all the shadows. I leave you with this poem by one of the writer’s from Sanctified Art Collective, Sarah Are Speed;



There is Room - by Sarah Are Speed

The world may feel like one long stretch of night,
like an endless winter, or a hovering rain cloud.

And life may feel like walking into the wind,
an uphill climb in every direction,
but we can still open the door.

We can't calm every storm,
but we can turn on the porch lights.

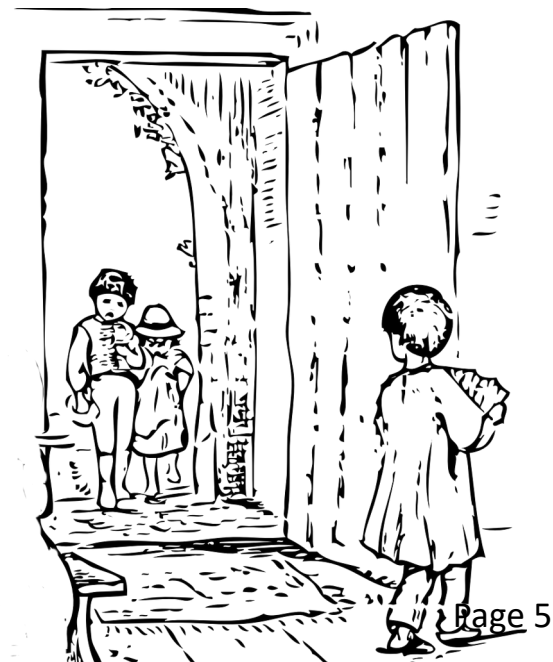
We can add chairs to the table.

We can keep clean sheets on the guest bed,
just in case.

We can hold the elevator,
and learn pronouns.

We can tell stories of belonging,
and take turns listening.

We can learn each other's names,



and plant trees for our children.
We can study privilege
and advocate for mental health.
We can insist,
every single day,
in a million different ways:
there is room,
there is room,
there is room for you here.
We can't calm every storm,
but we can turn on the porch lights.

Preparing for Advent – Kate Ballagh-Steeper

Advent is always a season of opposites; light and dark, despair and hope, grief and rejoicing. This year, using the amazing resources of A Sanctified Art, we will journey in Advent with the theme, “A Weary World Rejoices”. A Sanctified Art, is a collective of women clergy and artists who have created thematic resources to guide our journey. In their words; “Each of us are called to be artists just as much as ministers; in order to faithfully offer our gifts to the church and world, we cannot set our creativity aside.” To find out more, read about this creative group at <https://sanctifiedart.org/about>

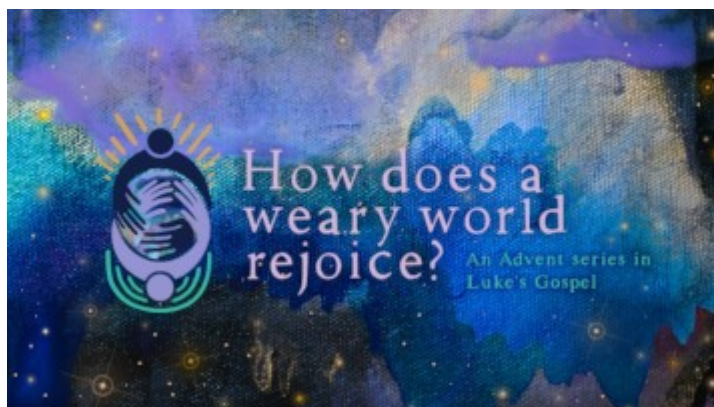
You will see art and images used in worship at both the Music and Message Service and at Manna.

We would like to send the devotional out electronically. Please feel free to share the following with your community via email or print communications:

“Our friends at A Sanctified Art have provided a special e-reader version of this year’s Advent devotional, which you can access on your computer and mobile devices:

<https://online.flippingbook.com/view/136123036/>

In order to protect their work, please refrain from sharing this link or posting it on social media.”





Welcome to another edition of the Harcourt Herald! Each month I am impressed with the many, thoughtful articles.

For December we were asked “Advent begins a new Church Year... What dreams do you have for your community of faith at Harcourt in the coming Year?”.

I have several hopes and dreams. Let me outline a few. While some may seem scary, I do believe that we should continue to reach for the stars!

1. Far more impact from GUM (Guelph United Ministries). We all know that congregations are shrinking, it’s hard to find new volunteers (especially in leadership roles), and of course our very real (and scary) financial situation. We cannot survive without change and that includes more joint efforts with all the GUM churches. Many more details will be brought forth next year, but I am currently chairing a GUM Executive Group with a mandate to see how we can work together in meaningful and impactful ways.
2. Another outreach project? What can I say? I am so inspired when I am involved in outreach. It’s one of the attractions of Harcourt. I dream another opportunity will come along like our recent support of the Shirzai family.
3. Continued success of our Community Hub. This year we will see approximately \$100,000 in rental income! WOW. It’s amazing and I know people are hard at work finding even more partners to work with. I see no reason why we can’t eventually hit \$150,000 per year. More importantly, I dream that we find partners that enable us to continue our mission of community outreach.
4. Finally, I dream that each and everyone one of you find your dreams come true.

Council Meeting of 11/22/23

Unfortunately, the Council meeting of 11/15 was delayed to 11/22 too late to include in this Herald. So I will just outline our agenda so that you know what will be discussed. I will provide a follow-up in the next Harcourt Herald.

Agenda:

- Discussion around the naming of our Community Hub.
- Budget! This will be the focus of the discussion.

- If there is time we will vote on “Remit 1: Establishing an Autonomous National Indigenous Organization” as outlined in my November Harcourt Herald article.

Financial Update

As of October 31, we show a surplus of \$5,583 (income over expenses). That’s a little worse than September where we were at a surplus of \$8,000. I will continue to remind you that we would be in a deficit situation of over \$50,000 if not for two generous one-time contributions.

Final word

As Council Chair, I would love to hear from you. What would you like to see from me? What information am I not giving you? What direction would you like to see Harcourt move in? Sky’s the limit – let me hear your hopes and dreams.



Champions’ Group Meeting: A Vision for the Future – Kathy Magee, Council rep for the Champions’ Group



In mid November, there was a meeting of the Champions (or the Leading Lights, as I think of them) for the four focus areas of Harcourt’s vision for the future. These regular meetings are to ensure and encourage working together, and supporting each other.

The interconnection and mutual support of the four themes is clear and evident. There is a natural confluence of focus and willingness to work together to take next near steps and support one another as we take risks, puzzle over challenges and strive to keep the communities of the faithful informed and energized.

Update from Task Groups



- **Worship (Dan Ganesh)**

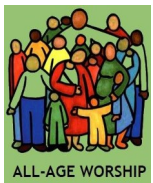
Dan described worship planning as an evolving process. Kate's openness to new ideas and willingness to put them into action is so important and valued in trying new ways to experience worship. The move from two to one minister has had a significant impact on providing worship leadership, particularly to cover gaps when Kate is away. Worship is tasked with finding resources and seeking increased lay participation, Dan gratefully acknowledged that we are blessed with much talent in our communities of the faithful to help fill these rolls. Flexible seating allows for creativity. The presence and support of Spiritual Life in many aspects of worship is an important asset.

One area that the worship task force hopes to address is accessing our on-line community. The goal is to have more interactive capability. One option being considered is a dedicated on-line service with a focus on engaging directly with that congregation. They hope to explore existing resources available to guide this initiative.



- **Spiritual Growth (Andre Auger)**

The Spiritual Life group is exploring how best to meet the needs of Harcourt faith communities. They recognize that listening to those communities is key in determining what is needed, so that efforts from Spiritual Life group are relevant. One area of focus is on the broader community. The Week of Guided Prayer and offering the Ignatian Exercises continues to be valued and well received. The Harcourt Day of Discovery in September was meaningful, well attended and an important connection among all the communities of the faithful within Harcourt.



- **Manna (Merrill Pierce and Pamela Girardi)**

The shared leadership model is going well. People are responding to requests for specific projects. New members are taking some responsibility and sharing the workload. New families are coming to Manna every week, for a variety of reasons and across the spectrum of ages. Flexible seating and a semi-circle arrangement is helpful and appreciated. The need for storage remains, as part of creating a sense of belonging and welcome. Several people from Spiritual Life Committee are working with Manna to explore spiritual practices. The Manna community has been engaged in many social justice issues: focus on food security, living wage promotion, housing, use of art to explore social justice issues, pie making for Saturday night supper for November 18th. Shared services with Music

and Message continue to provide opportunities for joining together. They are well received by both Music and Message and Manna communities. Two youth groups have started, led by Pamela and a parent volunteer from Manna - grades 6&7, and grades 8-12. They have both a spiritual and social justice focus. Pamela's leadership, creative ideas, and remarkable ability to make themes relevant to all ages was acknowledged and is greatly appreciated.



- **Partnerships and Community Hub (Stephen Pierce)**

The two main streams of this focus remain increased revenue, and expanding and deepening relationships with the broader community. The rental aspect is one tool we are using to engage people with Harcourt. To the end of September, the income from rental is \$78,000, with the possibility of reaching \$100,00 by end of the year. New renters are frequently approaching Harcourt. There are already bookings for summer camps for 2024. Space is a huge challenge, having to juggle available space and attempting to meet individual needs of the community. Balancing paid and free space as part of our outreach remains a priority.

The team is working on a statistical analysis for end of 2023, reflecting who uses our space and what needs we are meeting.

Stephen outlined the major operating issues that need to be addressed to continue to fulfill this aspect of Harcourt's vision for the future.

1. **Storage:** This is a significant issue, with renters requesting storage space. Meeting this need will require reworking space to create storage areas.
2. **Hosting roster:** It is important to have a Harcourt representative on site to facilitate positive and workable relationships with our community partners, and all our renters. So far, few volunteers have come forward to support the small group currently doing the work.
3. **Security:** Locks are needed on internal doors for security and to ensure that renters use only the space they have been assigned.
4. Making the most **effective use of the space** we have.
5. Need for a larger "chair team" to facilitate **room reconfiguration**, especially in the sanctuary.
6. **Operations Manager:** It is apparent that we need a dedicated person responsible for details, coordinating programs etc. Stephen is currently filling this demanding role, but as rentals increase, it will need to be a paid position.
7. **Outreach:** Contacts with the broader community continue to develop. For example, the task group has met with the City of Guelph staff who were impressed with our facilities.

There is the potential for future partnership, as our Hub model aligns with their plan to use existing facilities for variety of programs.

There is consistent feedback from renters about the positive atmosphere, and a sense of welcome, hospitality and friendliness. There is much evidence of “church” and community growing along side each other and the opportunity for integration. There is a gentle and important blurring of the lines that separate secular and sacred. It is apparent that there is a spiritual component in our efforts to bring the broader community into Harcourt. It is often subtle, rarely explicit, but creates the opportunity for conversations. Our contact with the broader community is a means to expand people’s experience in new and meaningful ways.

All four themes are creating an atmosphere and approach that embodies respect, kindness and inclusivity. Our mission has taken on new vitality as we put into action our Christian values, our Core Values of **responsibility, respect, risk-taking, vulnerability, and trust**. It is about inviting others into our space, where the sense of these life-giving tenets seeps into every room and every event. It provides us with the opportunity to lead by example, and to share our faith by living in Christ’s light.

The tireless, faithful dedication of the leaders of the four task groups, and their teams, is a blessing and an inspiration. May we, as members of the Harcourt communities of the faithful, find opportunities to support, encourage and engage with this exciting, daunting and crucial journey. May it be so.



A Dreamer dreams... - Dan Ganesh, “champion” for Worship

Joseph with his multicoloured coat was gifted with the ability to interpret dreams. I hold no such gift. So when I was asked to comment on my dreams for where I saw Worship at Harcourt in 2024 (and beyond), I know that I could only offer hope, but no clear pathway.

The current buzzword is Sustainability. In the strictest sense, this concept embraces the goal to reduce green house emissions. (Several parishes have undertaken projects to reduce their overall greenhouse emissions, via grants being acquired from the Government. While the

increase in rental property use, via Community Hub projects, improves greenhouse usage, further physical improvements may be achieved with such grants). But for me Sustainability is also a goal in terms of Christian Spirituality! Are we meeting the needs of our Harcourt Community in fulfilling its Spiritual development today and for the future? Is there a demand and need for this type of sustainability?

Our World is a mess currently. So I would venture to say that there has never been as good a time (at least within the past forty years) for Christian Spirituality. But this type of spirituality may have to be provided in a different manner. My question is how? How do we provide outreach to those to who have likely never set forth in a Church, or have a very negative view of the institution?

Currently, I think that the needs of spiritual sustaining are addressed by those attending the Music and Message Worship Service. Why? I think that these are the 'traditional' United Church folk who feel comfortable in a Service that essentially follows a set pattern (with some nuances for some excitement). The on-line feature offers an outreach from the Church, but is currently very limited in terms of interaction. Manna is an avenue for the younger generation to follow along a social justice bent, juxtaposed within Christian type doctrine. Holy Listening is yet another path for those who prefer an on-line interactive experience, with a current focus on readings and personal interpretations from the Bible. Holy Listening has a wide broadband width, but in reality, its numbers have remained steadfast over the years. Manna offers potential for growth, and has garnered Harcourt support. As for the traditional service, it is difficult to envision further progress beyond the current attendance and participation. Of note is that, prior to the formation of the Community Hub, the financial sustainability of all of Harcourt resided predominantly with this group. Attrition is expected as these parishioners continue to age. One stop gap is the amalgamation of the GUM Churches, but that also has a finiteness since the other GUM members have a similar demographic.

On-line interactive Worship Service may be one avenue for Harcourt to try. Mention has been made of other United Churches that have developed a vibrant on-line interactive service where participants support Church activities (including financially). Adaptation of such a service at Harcourt is a dream today. Challenges to overcome would include the following – a specific dedicated service would be required, it would require additional staffing – both ministerially and technical support, it would require specific outreach initiatives, specifically for those other than the 'traditional', it would need to compensate for the intimacy of a Sanctuary, the sharing of Holy Sacraments such as Communion, the face-to-face social interaction, Harcourt Cafe etc, it would require music (including the Choir) offered either live or perhaps recorded. Harcourt is blessed with many dreamers with many talents. It would take a group of some of these dedicated souls to move this idea forward.



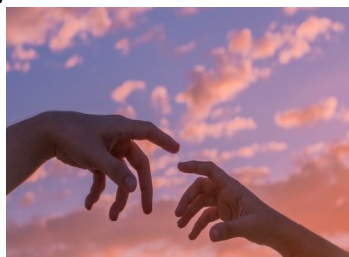


The Power of Intentional Spiritual Practice - Andre Auger, “champion” for Spiritual Life

I couldn't resist this topic: I love talking about my dreams for Harcourt as we enter a new Church Year! I remember almost 20 years ago when Diana Butler Bass and Russ Taussig shared the fruit of their extensive research into what helps maintain the vitality in congregations. Both identified that when congregations engaged, both individually and corporately, in intentional spiritual practices, chances were they would remain vital. Spiritual practices, they concluded, fed people and helped them through long, dry, or difficult periods.

It was this – and research like it – that convinced me that Harcourt would benefit from a formal Spiritual Life Committee which would dedicate its efforts to promoting, fostering and encouraging intentional spiritual practices. Over the years since our creation in 2007 we have done quite a bit toward our goal – the Ecumenical Week of Guided Prayer each February, the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises every two years, congregational retreats (except during the pandemic), as well as devotional guides for Advent and Lent. We've also offered the occasional worship service centred on some aspect of spirituality. We also introduced the congregation to “holy listening,” originally at the 9:00 AM service, but now regularly on-line every Sunday morning. Holy listening is also an integral part of most committee meetings as well as our annual general meetings. (If you're interested, read Michael Higgins's op ed piece in the Globe and Mail of Nov 3, where he identifies “holy listening” as the radical practice causing a major shift in the Roman Catholic Church's synodal process. He even names John Veltri, and John English from Loyola House in Guelph as the originators. Little does he know that a third John – John Buttars – was involved, and that Harcourt has incorporated it in its daily activity!)

So, my dream for Harcourt? That our three communities of faith realize how rewarding for church life it is when it has such an intentional spiritual focus! That more and more, we include in our corporate worship elements of spiritual practice. That more and more members of our communities of faith take advantage of the resources available to deepen their relationship with God. That younger people who have experienced the power of intentional spiritual practices decide to play a leadership role in the next generation of the Spiritual Life Committee (yeah: we on the Committee are getting old...). Finally, that the champions of the four key directions of the “new” Harcourt – Manna, Worship, Community Hub, and Spiritual Life – work together to take advantage of each other's passions and create something new, designed to ensure the long-term vibrancy of our communities of faith.



Manna Dreams its next Year – Andre Auger, on behalf of Pamela Girardi, “champion” for Manna

At its November 26th worship, Manna held a “dreaming time,” to celebrate the end of one Church Year and the beginning of another. To prepare us, we were treated to an excellent PowerPoint presentation which reviewed all the exciting events of the past Year.

Then, participants were invited to write down their dreams for the coming Year’s activities. Some 40 adults and children participated. The final product was a long chain of ideas (see photo). These were transcribed and will serve as planning material for the Manna team to design worship activities for the next several months.

Manna is clearly a community of faith that prefers their worship to be active! Active, but often in the sense of community service. Many of the “dreams” talked about food security and cooking and baking for others. Picking carrots seems to have been a big hit and several contributions wanted this tradition to continue! Music is also very important, and several ideas referred to creating musical events. Adults want more chances to reflect on a deeper level on relevant topics. This Year’s “Discovery Day” was obviously successful, and several requested a repeat. Ideas were not just about the Sunday times together, but evening activities, such as games and movie nights. Opportunities for artistic creativity were also important in the list of ideas. Social justice feature prominently among the ideas, and many suggestions involved reaching out to other social agencies to plan shared activities.



Stay tuned for this new way of being a community of faith!



My Dream of a Gathering Place – Steve Pierce, “champion” for the “Community Hub”

I have been asked to describe my hopes and dreams for Harcourt in the coming year. I have had many dreams or visions for Harcourt over the years. They have been both in my head and in my heart. To put them on paper is a challenge and I am not sure words will accurately reflect what is especially in my heart. Dreams of course have no rules or limitations.

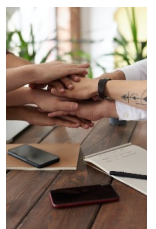
One important aspect of “church” is community. However, churches can no longer be a community unto themselves. People may come to church for different reasons but a sense of belonging or being connected has always been an important reason. We at Harcourt have begun a journey of redefining our relationship with the broader community. We have begun to say to the community that this is not just Harcourt’s space, this is also your space. We are in essence inviting the community in.

We are also wanting to use our space differently and to grow our revenue so that the “church” is sustained. We also want to go further by redefining our relationship with the community. Harcourt as a landlord of rental space is not sufficient. The journey goes beyond this beginning stage.



Perhaps, another way of saying this is that we are inviting the secular into our space. Here is where my dream picks up speed. Some would suggest that the secular will contaminate the Harcourt community and therefore we should remain separate. This spells death. This is dualistic thinking which is contrary to the teachings of Jesus. Do we not say “all are welcome”? Do we really believe we are different than the broader culture? What we can do, however, is to communicate or share our message through a different language, broader relationships and sharing common experiences.

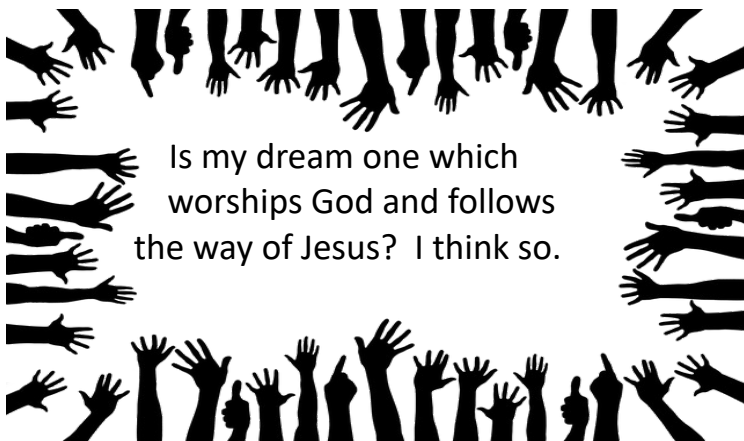
My dream is that Harcourt will not die and that the mission is kept alive in a different way. My dream is based in two questions: *How are we “moved”?* Which leads to the second question: *How do we experience the spirit or the sacred?* We experience the spirit in different ways. One of the ways the spirit appears is through a sense of community with others. In many ways, I equate community and church as being the same thing. *My dream is to develop a sense of community at Harcourt for many more people.* This would happen not through religious language or practices, but by bringing people together. We can hang on to religious and traditional language and rituals to which most people can’t or don’t want to relate. These stay relevant to those on the inside.



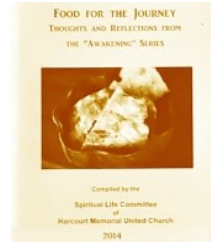
If Harcourt were to die, we could sell the property to a developer who might want to build condos. Whatever the use, the property would be in private hands. Harcourt is a community asset and my dream is that it remains a public space, a community space or the idea of the “commons”. We need common space that can be preserved for the future. So, we bring the spiritual and secular (non-church) together. It becomes a true “gathering place” or meeting place for all people. What is Harcourt’s message? The common place is a safe place, respectful, inclusive, open, welcoming and accepting of our differences whether it be our language, culture, age, sexual orientation and gender identity. It is a place where vulnerability is encouraged and embraced. Here is the true value. This can happen in a world where there is division, anger, hate and violence. It can become a healing place, a grieving place, a place of peace in a chaotic world. It can become a place where people experience joy in a world of sadness and pain. Is this not a message of light?

In my dream the message/mission is not communicated by church language and rituals. The message is communicated through what we do and how we do it. It is not that spiritual practices as we know them become irrelevant. For some, these will always be present in their lives. The church continues its mission alongside the broader invitation to the community. The coming together of the Harcourt church community with the broader community may produce common ground where unknown opportunities exist. There may be “thin” spaces. We need to redefine spiritual practice. The spiritual practices are created in the way we live with and interact with other people. There is incredible hospitality, warmth, love and care for all who enter the doors or visit the grounds with its gardens. The spirit appears. People are moved. How are we “moved” by the spirit? It may be through music, play, art, grieving, summer camps, walks, authentic relationships, working in a community garden etc. This place I dream about is a busy place full of energy, and joy.

I can be accused of minimizing the importance and role of the existing church or religion. I am actually redefining all of these - same message/mission, different community, language and experiences. Does God care about the message/mission and how we bring people together or about our institutions, rules and regulations?



Food for the Journey - Lisa Beattie, for the Spiritual Life Committee



This morning I read, as I always do, the Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. The meditation was adapted from Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York: Convergent, 2021). Here is part of what he says:

Creation—be it planets, plants, or pandas—was not just a warm-up act for the human story or the Bible. The natural world is its own good and sufficient story, if we can only learn to see it with humility and love. That takes contemplative practice, stopping our busy and superficial minds long enough to see the beauty, allow the truth, and protect the inherent goodness of what is—whether it profits or pleases us or not.

If we can recognize that we belong to such a rhythm and ecosystem, and intentionally rejoice in it, we can begin to find our place in the universe.

I admire the perspective of Richard Rohr who often starts from the bottom up rather than top down. In this meditation he focuses on a divine love which can be demonstrated by immediate experience and the innateness of interconnectedness. As a member of the SLC, I have recently been shown that immediacy and interconnectedness at Harcourt so clearly. Each occurrence – and to me all linked so beautifully to the core of Harcourt – sprang from the booklet created in response to creating a version of the Lord's Prayer. (copies are still available from Harcourt. Check with the Office.)

For about three weeks now I have found myself in many disparate places and times in which the communal renderings of this prayer were read and shared. I was there for each of them – perhaps there are others that you were present for.

At a Zoom 10am-Mindstretch-discussion-group held on Nov 16, Lila Engberg was remembered, and her version was read as the closing prayer. We also heard a version written by the late Everson T. Sieunarine. On Thursday evening at 6:15pm in the chapel, Janet

Gostonyi's version was read as we closed sharing communion together. Afterwards, even though she was unable to be there herself, a copy of the service was brought to her and the news shared with her and her spiritual companion. At the same 6:15pm service a week later, Sandy Middleton's was read in the in-person gathering. On Sundays in the Sanctuary, the gathered congregation may share in one of the versions of the Lord's Prayer. On November 19th I was present for the one written by Jim Cotter.

When I respond to the question – what are my dreams for Harcourt – I think of Richard Rohr's words to intentionally rejoice in an ecosystem. These past weeks I observed and participated in the deep roots manifested in sharing of prayer in separate places and times and yet saw that underlying them is not separation but a profound inbreaking universal reality – one that includes diversity, one that includes change and growth taking us we know not where exactly – but one that also holds us and connects us in the way that deep roots do.

May we celebrate our eco-system and our journey. My dream is that the contemplative practice of pausing to notice and to reflect is something we continue to share with one another. My gratitude is for all the ways we are already doing exactly this.



Discovering my “dream church” – Debra Nicholson

About 15 months ago, I attended my first Manna service in an old-growth forest. Even though I had been a regular church attender most of my life, heading into the woods and looking for a group of strangers to do “church” with was daunting. I had just read “Church of the Wild,” so I appreciated this chance to worship in nature.



I was still not sure if I wanted to find a church. Most days, I didn't. On the days that I did, I dreamed of finding one that was progressive, contemplative and practiced creation care, social justice and inclusion. I decided that if what I was looking for did exist, I would have to trust the spirit to find it.



In the meantime, I spent lots of Sundays in parks and a few in churches. Much of what I hoped for I could find in nature. My most profound experiences with the divine had always happened alone in natural settings. One day, I happened on Lynn Hancock and her bubbles at Royal City Park. I walked away, feeling lighter. I decided to google "churches near here." Harcourt came up on that search.

As I read about Manna, I knew that was where I wanted to explore the next steps in my faith.

I don't know if I can answer the question of "what my dreams are for Manna" because Manna is my dream.

Manna is what I hoped that church could be. I am reminded each time I come that children will lead us if we let them. The leadership is gentle and reflective. The experiential activities make my neurodivergent brain very happy. Tongue drums, labyrinths and meditation have softened the depths of my heart.

My goal is to get to know more people in 2024.

There is so much more to Manna than my personal experiences. Manna is a community of people of all ages who are living out their faith. We don't just talk about creation care, we do it. We learn about and practice social justice. We don't just talk about prayer; we pray in ways that it doesn't matter if you are 6 or 66. We are being challenged to keep on caring for the world and all the living things that inhabit it.

A Dream for the Church from a Candidate for Ministry – Jamie Gibson

[Jamie, now in his second year at Emmanuel, has been accepted by the UCC as candidate for ministry upon recommendation of a Committee created by Miriam and chaired by Andrew Hyde. We all wish Jamie well! - Ed]

Friends and colleagues at Harcourt Memorial, it is a great consolation to share in our exchange for this season of Advent.

How do we prepare for the birth of the Coming King during this epoch of bloodshed? It is a thought that has perilled me for the last number of weeks since October 7th. At this time, the Nativity Story feels less other-worldly and more present than ever. I cannot refrain but think of Herod the tyrant's call to murder all boys under the age of two (as per Matthew 2:16) when I witness reports and images of thousands of children killed in Gaza. We must never forget that the Christmas story is, fundamentally, a story of refugees. There is a great disharmony stirring in the hearts of many this season.

How do we hope and anticipate in the face of such a gigantic crisis which shows no near sign of resolution? I remind myself that hope is something which bends-in towards itself: hope is always hope-against-hope, constituted by some kind of negative momentum. However, hope is not a closed feedback loop in the image of the ouroboros serpent. Instead, it is a positive feedback loop which propels us towards a future moment of overcoming.



Jürgen Moltmann in *Theology of Hope* puts it succinctly: “the doctrine of the Christian hope ... embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it.” There is the lingering of God, even and especially during a calamity. Alfred Whitehead suggests to us that God is the saviour of humanity insofar as He prehends the memory of those finite entities which have perished and pours back into the world that which is worth saving – the heavenly return of things lost occurs in our experience of inspiration, even when that inspiration is mired in grief. Charles Hartsthorne would likely add that God's love is most totally manifest here: not in His omnipotence, but in His receptivity to change. As much is reflected in the writing of the prophet Isaiah: “And [God] looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress” (Isaiah 5:7, NIV).

When God weeps, we weep; when we sing, God sings. And that rich tradition, that cloud of witnesses, is what I believe we should be most attentive to as we discern the content of our anticipations during this Advent season. Lastly, to know the content of our anticipations with absolute clarity is not possible. To live in hope is to live thirstier still. Moltmann says: “If we had

before our eyes only what we see, then we should cheerfully or reluctantly reconcile ourselves with things as they happened to be. That we do not reconcile ourselves, that there is no pleasant harmony between us and reality, is due to our unquenchable hope."

It is sung in our cherished hymn "O Holy Night": "Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His Gospel is Peace / Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother / And in His name, all oppression shall cease."
May God bless and keep you always.

Dreams from a long-standing lay leader – Jean Hume

[This was sent as an email to explain why Jean could not write an article. I asked her permission to use it just as it was! The title of this article is mine. - Ed]

I don't know what to dream for because every time I think of what I would like to see happen within my age range, I'm forced to face reality. It is working together for the good of others that brings me the greatest sense of fellowship.

I am happy to see the church building becoming a hub for the community and attracting programs that bring people together in a world that seems to know less and less about their neighbours.

I love to know that there is still a place where I am likely to see my church friends. I admire the volunteers who are giving there all to maintain a place where we can be together to focus on our spiritual beliefs and where we can also sit quietly and talk to God away from the business of life.

Blessings.



A Dream for Manna – Jonathan VanderSteen

[This was sent to me as an email explaining why Jonathan could not write an article. The sentiments expressed in the email constituted a great contribution to this Issue. - Ed]

Ultimately, my dream for the Manna community is that it continues to grow to be a vibrant community for my family. I long for deep relationships with other families as we navigate the world's current challenges. I honestly think that Manna may be one of Guelph's best kept secrets. It would be nice to see a slightly larger critical mass. Ha - there's some quick thoughts, but I wouldn't be able to put a full article together over the next weeks.



Harcourt as a “Thin Place” – Lynn Hancock

Have you heard of a Celtic phrase: “Thin Place”? I recently read that the phrase referred to “when the Spiritual atmosphere of a location made it easy to connect with God, almost as though there is no barrier between heaven and earth.”

This past summer, I have been drawn to Royal City Park as my preferred bubbling location. The encounters I have had with strangers have led me to believe that the Royal City Park has become a “thin place” for me. Retired, I have the flexibility to show up anytime. What could explain the unforgettable encounters with strangers. The synchronicity. The “chance” encounters. What led me to Royal City Park on that day at that time to meet that person(s); some having travelled from far away to visit family; attend a memorial service for a loved one. They just happened to be there?! As you know, the Sacred Fire circle is located on the south side of the river and many trees have been planted in memory of loved ones. All I know is that the energy I feel at Royal City Park is very different from the other parks in Guelph. A “thin place” for me.

I have a dream for Harcourt. My dream is that Harcourt will feel like a “thin place” for those who enter the building or enjoy the property and garden space. Some of my hopes and dreams have already been realized. I have had goosebumps on many different occasions. Last Sunday, I attended a Harcourt Choir concert and my energy was transformed. I agree with others. It was so much more than a fundraiser. It was uplifting and inspirational. Yesterday, I attended a fundraising concert featuring Tannis Slimmon and Lewis Melville, Jane Lewis and Eve Goldberg with a fabulous drummer, Cheryl Prashker. I felt transformed by the music and the energy in the room was wonderful. I left feeling inspired, uplifted and energized. It was an

opportunity to experience joy, happiness and a sense of peace and calm. What can I say? It felt like a “thin place”.



As a community of faith, we have an opportunity to invite and welcome folks to 87 Dean Avenue; not only a gathering place but potentially a “thin place”. My hopes and dreams allow me to imagine providing opportunities for people to experience JOY, HAPPINESS and PEACE, free from the worry, stress, anxiety and fear. We have an opportunity to provide shelter and sanctuary. May it be so.

Notes from the National UCW Executive Meeting, September 18-22, 2023

[Ruth Kaufman submitted this quote as a reminder that there continue to be faithful people of God who continue the ministry of Jesus in the midst of decline and discouragement. - Ed]

In 2022, UCW members raised \$2,305,000 for Mission and Service – almost a million more than the previous year. “This is a story of hope,” says, Rev Michael Blair, Executive Secretary of the UCC: The UCW has been “faithful in what you think your call has been... In the midst of decline [of membership], the people of God are still faithful. Church buildings come and go but the people of God are still faithful in meeting together as communities of faith without buildings or ministers.”



Interview of the Very Rev Bruce McLeod – Part 2

[This is the second part of the interview Judi Morris conducted with Bruce for the October Herald - Ed]

Judi: How do you see the future of the United Church in Canada?

Bruce: Well. I don't see it. It's up for grabs. It has certainly shrunken a lot but maybe that's a good thing! I remember the church in East Germany lost members in the 60s. One of their leaders said, "We're just dieting. We were too fat, and forgot who we were meant to be."

Maybe that's happening to us.

Or, maybe we're just dying - going down wishing it was like it was in the 50s.

But it will *never* be like that again and neither should it be. "*This is the day the Lord has made*" where future paths of obedience are waiting to be found. Maybe we'll learn to be a smaller, sharper community that knows what it's doing and why. Or, maybe we'll merge with other churches. Already United, Anglican, and Presbyterian national offices are planning to share costs and space in a new office tower at Toronto's Bloor Street Church.

Judi: Is there a particular hymn/song that inspires/sustains you?

Bruce: Yes. I like *O Love that will not let me go*, because I believe it's true. Alison says that was Ghandi's favourite as well. Written by George Matheson, the last verse says "*O joy that seeketh me through pain/, I trace the rainbow through the rain.*" But Matheson was blind. He couldn't "trace" anything. His original words (too much for the Hymn Book Committee) were "*O joy that seeketh me through pain/ I climb the rainbows through the rain.*"

I love that hymn.

Judi: What would you like the congregation of Harcourt to know and understand about the power of Spirit?

Bruce: Well, the very fact the church is still here at all, after 2,000 years, is a tribute to the Spirit. ("Enough to make a person believe in God", someone said.) There's a Spirit built into this world from the beginning. "*Turn but a stone, and start a wing*", poet Francis Thompson reminds us.

We meet Spirit by babies' beds, and when people breathe their last. It's there when we do things we never thought we could, when people hold each other in the face of disaster, when we think of Bob McClure or Martin Luther King, who believed God's Spirit required the use of them while they were briefly here.

The Spirit is right outside my morning window where trees bend patiently before whatever the seasons demand. They dance to Creation's ancient rhythm of life and death and life again. They are Music from the beginning, still trying to catch our ears, settle us down, and help our worried lives get back in tune.

Judi: Can you share any particular experience in your life/ministry where you clearly saw Spirit at work?

Bruce: At my very first church, police interrupted a church Christmas Party. There'd been a fatal accident. They wanted me to tell a woman her husband had been killed, driving home from Barrie. I can still see her at the door - a table set for two, behind. "What to say?", the new minister wondered.

That's when I learned no words were needed at all. The woman saw the police car. She knew. Without saying anything, we reached for each other, and held on.

Looking back, I think we both sensed a prior Presence there with us – some encompassing Spirit that was hurt in our hurt, wept with our tears. A Spirit beyond words, holding us both.

Judi: I watched your YouTube video. I heard you refer to "Dark Times." That gave me a question. Dark Times is something that ministers must be faced and bombarded with. People don't make appointments to share the good in their lives. How do you deal with dark times of those suffering and your own? Where do you go with it first?

Bruce: Well I'd learned on that Christmas doorstep that Spirit is always there. 'Where shall I go from your Spirit ...or fly from your Presence?' we ask (Psalm 139:7). The answer is "Nowhere! The Spirit's always there."

So, after whatever dreadful occurrence, the minister can go to the place of pain, knowing he/she won't be going alone. That's been my experience, over and over.

And don't forget! There are times, like weddings, and new births, where pastoral ministers are privileged to share the Spirit's joy.

Judi: You have had to do a lot of reading. Is there any particular book or author that inspires you.?

Bruce: I've always loved reading. As eyesight declined, an adjustable "reading screen" from the *Low Vision Unit, at Waterloo's Optometry School*, helped a lot. So many new technologies are there these days. I'm also a big fan of Audible.ca, with outstanding readers of books new and old. I just finished *American Prometheus*, about Robert Oppenheimer. Wonderful! More and more, I also turn to poets, like George Herbert and Wendell Berry. They all expand my world.

Judi: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

Bruce: Yes! The major issue for the United Church in the 60's was the "New Curriculum" (NC), a brand-new approach for Sunday Schools. Throwaway weekly leaflets were replaced by take-home, hard-cover books by well known (and not so well known!) Bible scholars for each age level, from Primary to Adult.

For the first time ever, current biblical scholarship was taken beyond Seminaries, and into the pews. There followed both public controversy – ("You mean you don't have to take everything literally anymore?"), and instant success. (The first book published (*The Word and The Way* by Queens' Principal Donald Mathers), was for adults. It was a runaway best seller, not just in the United Church.)

I was appalled, but pleased, in 1958, to find a letter from General Editor Peter White, saying "Why not write a book, Bruce?" I'd actually noticed him recently, "checking me out", I guess, at my new suburban church in Port Credit. He suggested I do a book for young teenagers, on Jesus and Mark's Gospel. I tested out chapters at outdoor summer services. The resulting book was called "*Remember the Lord.*"

By 1960, the New Curriculum was in use in most UC congregations across Canada. It lasted for three 3-year cycles.

Judi: Anything else?

Bruce: Well, from 1975-79, I was appointed to the new "private citizen" *Ontario Human Rights Commission*". Human Rights in Ontario are only a recent tradition. For most of Canadian history, minority people could be freely denied employment, or access to public facilities.

But World War II's Holocaust laid bare the potential price of discrimination. Newly burgeoning Industrialization cared less about colour, or national origin, than ability to perform. Sociologists

learned that differing racial achievement levels were based less on innate differences, than unequal opportunities, and that varying national cultural traits weren't "better" than, each other, just different.

In 1945, a landmark court decision ruled that (then common) Real Estate covenants restricting "Jews or persons of objectionable nationality" from property purchases were henceforth "offensive to public policy in Ontario". For the next decade, there followed new Employment, and Housing laws and, in 1962, the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Human Rights legislation is not "punitive", but persuasive, in intent. Human Rights officers meet with people who think the new laws unfair. Not to "punish", but win them to the new consensus on mutual respect in Ontario. No more discrimination on grounds of race, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, or a list of other conditions. By far, the most of cases are settled amicably. The rest come before Commission meetings for more formal action..

The first action our new Commission took, was to recommend the first Code Review in 15 years. I was seconded to coordinate. We held 17 astoundingly well attended public meetings, from Kingston to Thunder Bay. We heard heartfelt pleas to include more grounds on which discrimination would be prohibited – like sexual orientation and prisoners' rights. It was moving to hear people from one group speak up for another. We received over 300 written briefs.

In 1977 we published *Life Together* – with nearly a hundred recommendations, most of them now in force.

I noticed some Commission employees were surprised to suddenly have a minister working there.

But I liked them, liked working beside them. No, most weren't "church people" They didn't know Isaiah 58, Exodus 3:7-8, or Jesus' words, "The Spirit...has sent me to bring good news to the poor..." (Luke 4:18). No matter. The Spirit knew their names, and used them for much social good.

Judi: We could spend another hour on experiences you have had, but with what we have here, we certainly been able to see who you are and why you were elected as the 25th and youngest Moderator of the United Church of Canada.

When I first spoke with you over the phone you quickly clarified you were to be called Bruce even though your education qualifies you otherwise. And while it is required for me to address you correctly at the beginning... I will say now... Bruce...we are most grateful, not only for this

interview, but more for all your contributions to humankind in the name of God and with the grace of Bruce McLeod. Thank you.

[Bruce wanted us to make a correction to his earlier part of interview. - Ed]

[In the interview, I said] "Defeated by the Red Army, in 1947, Chiang fled to Taiwan, 100 miles west, claiming the island for China." Of course, as even people unfamiliar with the region might know, it should have read "100 miles east."

Be the Change - Lisa Browning

I am a few hours late in submitting this article (thank you, Marion, for your patience!) ... but I realize that this, as with everything in life, happened for a reason. I hosted a speakers' event last night, and one of the speakers asked the audience to think about what spirituality means to them. After a few minutes, he asked, "Did any of you think about connection?" Many hands were raised, and mine was one of them.

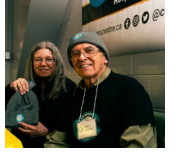
My original idea, when presented with the suggested theme for this month, was to talk about the recent Tannis Slimmon/Gathering Sparks concert, held at Harcourt on Sunday, November 12. And I will still do that. But had I not been asked to think about spirituality in the way the question was posed last night, I would not have been able to incorporate this concept into this article in quite the same way.



It took me little more than a couple of minutes to purchase my ticket for the November 12 concert. Not only do I love Tannis (and now, after hearing Gathering Sparks, I love them too!) ... but I also love any event that offers a charitable component, in addition to an opportunity for community connection.



Peter Gill's talk about the work of Chalmers Community Services Centre was informative to say the least, but more than that, it was inspirational. It was a call to action that was well heard. Food and housing insecurity is at an all-time high in Guelph.



Glenna Banda, Executive Director of United Way of Guelph and Wellington, was another of the speakers at last night's event, and her talk was entitled *A Shared Responsibility for Social Good*. The following statistics are posted on the United Way website:

- Almost 24% of households in Guelph-Wellington are food insecure
- Roughly 270 people in Guelph-Wellington are homeless each night

Getting back to the question posed last night, I believe that spirituality is about connection not just to a higher power, but also to each other.

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Matthew 18:20

As posted on our website, Harcourt is a "community providing space for people to explore and deepen their spiritual lives and their involvement in social justice." It all makes perfect sense to me. We have the people, we have the space, and I believe we have the drive to make a difference.

So ... what dreams do I have for my community of faith at Harcourt in the coming year? I would love to see more events like the Tannis Slimmon/Gathering Sparks concert. I would love to hear more speakers like Peter Gill. And I would love to explore more ways to do as Mahatma Ghandi challenged us to do:

"Be the change that you wish to see in the world."



Advent brings candles ... wreaths ... calendars to count down the days until Christmas ... and at Harcourt for a number of years, Advent had brought something else: handbells! So what is their story?

In 1991, a donor offered a set of handbells to the congregation. The gift was a generous and welcome one, but Harcourt's policies about memorial gifts presented complications. Gifts were supposed to be used for things already on a list of acceptable items, but handbells were not listed. With effort and some controversy, a way was worked out. First, the Memorials Committee determined that a contribution could be made in honour of a living person, which was the situation in this case. Then a set of handbells was added to the list of appropriate memorials. Some Board members had concerns about obligating the congregation to increased operating expenses in the future, but Alison volunteered her time as director for the first year. At a meeting that October, the congregation was "asked for approval of this purchase in retrospect," and the motion carried unanimously.



Although it had been necessary to remove roadblocks so that the gift could be accepted, memories of the difficulties faded when a bell choir was formed during the autumn and began to play in church services during Advent. There was only one complaint: "Why don't they smile?" Gradually the novice players gained skill, and their facial expressions of grim concentration became a bit more relaxed. With the death of Deane Moore's husband, it could be made known that she was the donor and the bells were in his memory. Even after she was unable to attend church regularly, Deane made an effort to be present when she knew that the bells would be played, so that she could enjoy the music that so enriched the services of worship. After Deane's death in 2005, the bells became a memorial to her as well as to her husband.



Well, why *don't* the handbell players smile more? It's because they're concentrating! If you sing a hymn or another song, you're singing all the time. If you play the piano, you're playing the whole piece. It's the same if you're playing guitar chords for a song. But with handbells, you have three or four bells in front of you—the equivalent of two white keys on the piano and whatever black keys go with them. It's your job watch the music, count as the

beats go by, and stay alert for when your notes are supposed to play. You may forget to smile even though you're enjoying playing!

Why do handbell players wear gloves? The bells are brass, and they don't take kindly to the natural oils of skin. Of course the players hold them by the handles most of the time, but sometimes special techniques require the players to touch the bells.

And why doesn't the handbell choir play more often? People are busy, and it's hard to schedule. But let's hope that we will hear the joyous sounds of handbells again this Advent!

(And if you'd like to try the bells for yourself, you'd be welcome. Ask Alison for the time of the next rehearsal.)

The Answer!!!!

