

Town hall meeting on Harcourt's visioning priorities

By Carolyn Davidson

On Sunday, February 12, 2023, Council hosted a hybrid (in-person and Zoom) meeting at which a panel of “champions” or task group leaders gave an update on the activities of various groups who are working on “next near steps” related to Harcourt’s four visioning priorities. The presenters were: Pamela Girardi and Merrill Pierce (supporting the growth of Manna), Andre Auger (spiritual life), Dan Ganesh (worship), and Steve Pierce (building partnerships/ community hub). Kathy Magee also participated as the Council representative who is keeping an intentional focus on points of integration across the priorities.

Supporting the growth of Manna

Pamela and Merrill gave an overview of Manna, which is a hands-on, experiential worship community that invites people of all ages to come together, be engaged, learn, and leave spiritually enriched. In the past year, more than 140 people have attended Manna services and events who do not normally attend other services at Harcourt. These include 45 children and youth, along with their parents, grandparents and caregivers, and other adults who attend on their own.

Through feedback from the congregation and Manna participants and leaders, the task group has identified seven long-term goals:

1. Work toward a sustainable model of leadership by making it easy for more people to get involved, particularly those who have busy schedules.
2. Welcome new members by communicating about Manna to the broader community, on the Harcourt website, through Guelph United Ministries (GUM), and on social media.
3. Create an inviting physical space in the Sanctuary that will make children and youth feel welcome.
4. Engage and meet the needs of children and youth, including holding special events or gatherings for youth from all of the GUM communities of faith.
5. Learn about and work together on social justice.
6. Nurture a community of care and connection.
7. Continue to experiment and grow as a church community.

Spiritual life

Andre began with a quote by Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner: “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist.” Although many of us may not think of ourselves as mystics, a mystic is simply someone who has an intentional, ongoing personal relationship with God. In the church of the future, people won’t come to church because that’s what their parents did, or because that’s what is expected. That kind of church isn’t going to survive. We are here today because church matters to us. And so, we’re already in a sense intentionally engaging in a mystic activity.

If we are all called to be mystics, how do we go about doing that as a community – or communities – of faith? We do it by paying attention to the presence of Spirit in everything we do. Originating in Celtic spirituality, “thin places” and “thin moments” are places and times that make us feel something larger than ourselves, such as when we go on a retreat or pilgrimage. According to a Celtic saying, “Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places, that distance is even shorter.”

At their retreat last summer, the Spiritual Life Committee decided to focus for the next while on “thin places” and “thin moments”. Andre explained that the approach will be intentionally general and open, allowing the Spirit to lead the way. The Committee will look for opportunities to work with groups and individuals to heighten an awareness of practices related to thin moments and thin places, recognizing that there are many different kinds of spiritualities.

This will include exploration and experimentation with new forms of digital ministry, such as Holy Listening Circle. And the Committee will also support the work of the other task groups’ priorities.

Worship

Dan began by recognizing the other members of the Worship task group: Karyn Davies (co-chair of Worship committee), Stan Bunston (covenanted spiritual companion, retired minister, and member of Holy Listening Circle), Sandy Phair (member of Holy Listening Circle and long-time participant in bible study and faith discussions), Tom Auger (a musician and web designer who has studied the innovative ways in which United Church congregations across Canada worship), and our new minister, Rev. Kate Ballagh-Steeper, who brings fresh experience in worship from outside of Harcourt. The Worship task group has begun their work relatively recently, as they awaited Kate’s arrival.

As they develop “next near steps” over the coming three to five years, the Worship task group has identified three goals:

1. Opportunities for spiritual enrichment
2. Growing stewardship online
3. Sustainability.

Dan explained that the process going forward will be dynamic, with lots of experimentation. COVID has already brought a significant amount of change, and next near steps will focus on ideas that will be relatively easy to implement in the short term: for example, shared worship with GUM, and new ways of worship that will be enabled by flexible seating. Two-way communication will be key to building stewardship within our online community of faith.

Dan cautioned that not everything will succeed and not everything will stick. The Worship task group is counting on everyone’s prayers, guidance, participation and support as they forge ahead.

Building partnerships/community hub

Harcourt is embarking on a project of revitalization through renewing our relationship with the Guelph community. As part of this, we are working in collaboration with the not-for-profit Trinity Centres Foundation (TCF) to discover how we might leverage our building as a vital community asset. We hope to sustain the mission of the Church by managing our space more effectively and producing additional revenues through developing partnerships.

Steve outlined the various parts of this large and multi-faceted project. At least a dozen people are working on the following aspects:

1. External welcome: Do people feel welcome as they enter our property?
2. Website and communication: The website has been updated and refreshed to make it easier for people to find information about rentals, in addition to church information.
3. Internal welcome: What do people experience when they walk in the front or back door?
4. Rentals: How do our rates compare to those of other churches, and can we make our booking process easier and more efficient?
5. Governance: TCF has shared a range of governance models for us to consider, beyond a landlord-tenant relationship, as we seek to share space with the community and our partners.
6. Stakeholders: TCF has identified a list of stakeholders to interview about their impressions of Harcourt, what the community needs, and what Harcourt might provide in terms of space.

Questions and Comments**

** Questions and comments have been edited for clarity and length.

Kathy Magee opened a question-and-answer period with two questions to the task group leaders:

In what ways is your area of focus connecting and supporting the other three in their next near steps?

The Spiritual Life task group is actively listening to the other three groups to find ways in which they might collaborate. The Worship task group recognizes that Harcourt is already responding to the many ways in which people worship, and sees obvious connections to Manna and Spiritual Life as it waits to see what opportunities may arise from the community hub. The community hub is focused on seeking sustainability for what we are doing, as we look forward with hope to a vibrant future.

In what ways do you envision strengthening our collective understanding of our next near steps?

Andre plans to keep the community informed, through articles in the Harcourt Herald, for example. Dan pointed out that our new steps in worship will not be hidden from view – we will all have an opportunity to experience them together, both within the building and beyond. Steve hopes to arrange a town hall-style meeting with Kendra Fry, one of the consultants at TCF,

to share her experience of working with churches in transition. And at the end of this phase of work, Trinity Centres Foundation will present a report that will map out a pathway for moving forward.

Lorraine Holding invited additional questions and comments from attendees:

I notice that we have a new email address: @HarcourtCommunity.ca. Will we continue to be known as Harcourt Memorial United Church?

Steve clarified that Harcourt United Church will still exist, and it will be advertised as such. But there will be an additional component to what happens here that will include the community hub. Lorraine added that at last year's Annual Meeting, we changed the name of one of our Council positions from "Congregational Life" to "Harcourt Community Life". These changes are intended to reflect both internal and external community.

If community groups begin occupying certain rooms within the building, will these spaces no longer be available for anyone else to use?

Steve explained that there will be some spaces and times that are designated for church use, and other spaces and times designated for community use. Space will always be available for church purposes. An analysis of space usage at Harcourt shows that the Sanctuary is used about 25% of the time, the Friendship Room between 11% and 22%, the Chapel about 8%, and Room 202/203 about 3%. The gym is in use about 27% of the time, and that's mainly due to the preschool. Much of the time, our space is just sitting empty, and that represents an opportunity for us.

Do the terms of reference for the community hub and partnerships task group include working with partners on shared interests (e.g., social justice, LGBTQ)?

Steve responded: absolutely. This isn't just about renting space. This is about our relationship with the community, and about consulting with the community to find out how they would like to partner with us.

In what ways does Council work with, and support, each of the task groups?

As Council's representative on the leadership team, Kathy Magee reports back to Council and contributes articles to the Herald to raise awareness within the Harcourt community of faith. Council is working very closely with all members of the leadership team, and in particular on the community hub. Council remains the governing body, and there are a number of steps that would need to take place before any change is put into action.

From the outside, Harcourt's building definitely looks like a church. Is the Community Hub task group proposing any structural changes to the church building?

Steve acknowledged that churches carry some baggage when it comes to interacting with the broader community – people need to feel comfortable that they can enter the church building without fear that we will try to "convert" them. Various churches have taken different

approaches to addressing that issue: for example, based on input from the community, All Saints Anglican Church in Kitchener built a community centre that is attached to, but separate from, the church building itself. However, Steve is not anticipating any major changes to Harcourt's building in the near future.

Holy Listening Circle is building an online community that is reaching people from Guelph, Ontario, North America and beyond – people from different denominations and from no church background at all. This growing edge of Harcourt's community may be invisible to those who don't take part in it. This, too, is part of spiritual life.

Andre shared that Norval United Church in Georgetown has more than 80 people who participate exclusively in online worship every week. This community of online worshippers has appointed two representatives to sit on the Search committee for a new minister. This speaks to a different understanding of what Church is. We need to start thinking about communities of faith beyond geography.

What could the broader church family be doing now – and in the next year or two – to support Manna?

Pamela and Merrill shared that Manna feels very supported by the Harcourt community of faith, from the loving support that has allowed that little experiment to grow into what it is today, to the sacrifices people are making to enable Manna to gather in the Sanctuary after the Music and Message service. Pamela would welcome contributions from anyone who has a gift to share with children, or adults, or the whole Manna community. The more gifts that are shared, the richer and more nourished our community becomes.

We are on a journey, and we don't know where we will end up. But we need information about the process, some kind of roadmap.

Kathy affirmed Council's commitment to stay in touch through the Harcourt Herald and the e-weekly. The purpose of today's town hall meeting was to give everyone a snapshot of where we are now and where we're going. Similar meetings will be held in the future. Rosalind Slater noted that communication would happen more easily if some of the gaps on Council were filled. Lorraine highlighted that Communications Committee is always welcoming new members. And there are other opportunities: don't hesitate to reach out to any committee that interests you.

As we open up our facilities and reach out to the community, will we be developing a policy to ensure that we are not making space available to groups that don't share Harcourt's core values?

Steve confirmed that this is part of the community consultation process. If a community group says they'd like to do something in our space that doesn't align with our core values, that's not going to happen. Dan added that this is already addressed in our rental policy and agreement.

I hope that we will look not only at space, but also at time. I'm caught in the dilemma of wanting to participate in multiple communities that meet at the same time.

In closing...

The town hall meeting, which followed a joint worship service combining Manna and the Music and Message services, was itself an experiment. About 65 people attended in person, with another 9 online via Zoom. An interactive hybrid meeting is quite different from livestreaming, and Lorraine acknowledged with gratitude the significant efforts of Mark Sears, Jerry Daminato and Casey Connor in making it happen. Lorraine also thanked Sandra Welch and Heather Hoeg and others for organizing and serving the snacks, tea and coffee.

Finally, Lorraine thanked Kathy, Andre, Dan, Pamela, Merrill and Steve for their updates, and also the many others who are part of the various task groups. Council hopes that as more people become familiar with each of the priorities, they too will want to get involved with the next steps of our journey.

