

St Andrew's United — Our Living Faith Story

Why does St Andrew's United in North Bay exist as a community of faith?

That is the crucial question in front of our community right now, as the pandemic that gripped the world is apparently waning in Canada. Why is this congregation here, now? What strengths do we have to offer? How is our piece of Jesus' ministry important to our city?

First, some background:

At the time of writing, this congregation is coming out of a perfect storm of difficult events. There was the belfry. Bricks were discovered on the front lawn. A careful look at where they might be coming from indicated that the belfry was unsafe and had to come down. The retirement of one longtime, beloved minister was followed by a change in pastoral relationship for the other longtime, beloved minister. The pandemic meant that actual physical worship had to move online for months. A flood in the lower level of the church knocked out a whole crucial area of the building including the kitchen and the gym. Each effect seemed to reverberate with others: the belfry, for instance, meant an unusual weight of expense, just before the pandemic cut income. The flood temporarily removed the building as a favoured site for movie-making in our city, an important source of income.

And now, as people begin to return to worship, no one is yet sure how the simple habit of going to church has changed during that long pandemic pause. People cannot hug each other yet, in a community built on affectionate, often non-verbal greetings. A surfeit of Zoom calls has been particularly difficult for non-computer-literate members, some of whom feel isolated from their church. Finally, a fracture line between some who want the congregation's Affirming status to be a matter of explicit public witness, and others who worry that the rainbow appears to be St Andrew's most important symbol, has caused bewilderment and confusion for many members: "Why can't we just love each other?" was a typical comment to the listening team.

That's the bad news. Especially for a congregation which — though definitely aging — was hosting, pre-pandemic, vital study groups and other events that indicated a sustainable congregation: Wednesday Worship, teas, the Kids Only bazaar, rainbow pot lucks, the food bank, concerts, for example. There was also considerable civic activism outside the building by St Andrew's members, who — supported by their faith — might be found attending city council meetings to voice opinions on pipelines, casinos or endangered species.

Second, more background:

However (and this, too, is necessary backdrop to answering the question of why St Andrew's exists) there is also good news.

The belfry — while not rebuilt as an aspect of the building — was safely removed and the roof restored. (St Andrews in fact became part of a television series about salvage operations.) The congregation was blessed with Lillian Robertson, an extraordinarily skilled transition minister who has been able to help people speak the truth to one another (among her other gifts.) The final report of the Transition Team is an incredibly valuable guide and resource as the congregation seeks a way forward. The flood has meant a new furnace and gym floor, mostly covered by insurance. And despite the disarray of ongoing repairs to the entire lower half of the building, Jan Ross, office administrator, maintains order with good humour.

Throughout the pandemic, worship — thanks to music director Ralph Johnston and the worship committee — has continued to be extremely creative and fulfilling, with online services (then and now) well attended. The volunteers who care for people needing the food bank are committed and steadfast. The new council is meeting regularly, and Wednesday Worship is back in a small but determined way,

And while we cannot know yet if the same number of people will return to regular worship as before the pandemic, each Sunday morning sees a rise in those moments of vulnerability and openness that distinguish this congregation: a testimonial to the power of being a food bank volunteer; a litany on the integrity of many different kinds of families. Behind the masks we all still have to wear, and despite the legitimate weariness of core volunteers whose stamina over the last two years has been breathtaking, there is also an urge to get on with it. Even though we are lacking in younger cohorts (many interviewees mentioned “our aging and small congregation”) St Andrew's still wants to know God's purpose for us, and fulfil that responsibility according to the strengths we have been given.

What are St. Andrew's strengths?

Wide Ranging Theology

The listening team asked that question. Again and again, the same answer appeared in different words: “There is room at St Andrews to be a progressive Christian.” “Inclusive. Caring for those in need. Concerned for the environment. Providing the rituals of

faith we love. Preaching the gospel.” St. Andrew’s, as one member put it, “has undertaken the journey to be an affirming church...and our congregation is slowly developing an understanding of what it means to be inclusive.” Several members indicated that’s why they chose this church.

Worship

Again, the same repeated answer, phrased differently: “The worship, both sermon and music,” said one. St Andrew’s, said another is “not a house of worship. I would call it a home of worship. The difference between a house and a home is, warm and caring, open and affirming with empathetic leadership that extends to the congregation as a whole.”

People

Over and over, the same response: “the skills, abilities and commitment of our volunteers and staff.” Another said, “It’s all about the people. It’s the core group of volunteers, and Lillian, even though I realize she’s only here for a short while, and the community.” As a group, said another, this community “is trying to understand, embody and share the gospel.” Along with this focus on community comes, naturally, a yearning to be reconnected with each other, to find those who have dropped away and bring them back so that the people can be whole again.

Justice

While community outreach was named in various ways as a strength, it is less clearly defined. Many pointed to the Food Bank, while others included long-standing connections with the downtown. Becoming an “open door” church is seen as a justice issue: “St. Andrew’s has “walked the walk” as a downtown church and this has been a source of pride and a source of connection for those who call St. Andrew’s “my church” was one who summarized a general feeling.

What are St Andrew’s Challenges and Possible Solutions?

The Cost of the Building

There’s no question the admittedly beautiful and loved historic building is a major source of financial anxiety. “The building itself is and has been limping along for some

time in the maintenance side which seems to be never ending,” said one member. “I can't help wondering -- do the people own it or does the Church own the people? I somehow think it is the latter unfortunately.”

The benefits of co-operation with other congregations in order to thrive appeared frequently. Many responses were along these lines: “If we can get past the problem of “why my church is closing and not yours” and instead see a combined and growing Church, I feel we might meet these challenges.”

At the same time, several people said, in different words that “if we are to join with another United Church, it is very important that we keep our affirming status.”

Others (while not dismissing the idea of co-operation) suggested that advance planning, and thoughtful management would be a good idea. The movie money, for instance, might be earmarked for building repair and maintenance.

Aging Membership

Many admitted that the people in the pews are generally elderly. Interestingly, most did not suggest lowering the average age with a magical influx of youth. They simply stated the importance of achieving and maintaining a critical mass of members in order to be self-sustaining. We need to “make St. Andrew’s a satisfying place to be – spiritually, socially and emotionally,” said one. “The heart, mind and soul need to be ministered to with a program of Sunday services and weekday activities strong enough to attract new members – so that the critical numbers of participants will be reached, and St. Andrew’s will re-awaken!”

Anxiety about finding a new minister

“The community needs a minister who will help define its identity and ministry.” said one respondent. “ How do we achieve this? We need good, effective leadership by hiring an ordained Minister who is willing to try to rebuild a depleted congregation.”

Similarly, the same person cited the “idea that the Pandemic is offering all churches the opportunity to experience a “reset” and emerge as a reborn entity with a keener focus on an evolving post-Covid mission. We need a leader with vision and energy (and with some degree of theological training) to facilitate the new way of carrying out God’s will in our faith community.”

So: At last. Why does St Andrew's United in North Bay exist as a community of faith?

Hidden in these responses, in the final Transition Team report, and in earlier documents, are answers to that question. It is not that these responses are entirely unknown; it is just that — under the financial and demographic pressures outlined above — they are often unspoken.

For example:

First of all, this is a faith community of deep spirituality. The constant affirmation of the importance of worship and music at St Andrew's, and the gratitude to those who have kept it vital during the pandemic, indicates that part of St Andrew's reason for being is to make a connection with the divine and the divine in each other. **Our new faith leader would be invited to participate in extremely meaningful, creative worship, with music, images, art, and spoken word.**

Secondly, this is a community that tries to look outside its walls. The loyalty and gratitude to those volunteers who are caring for others (i.e. the food bank) indicates that another reason for St Andrew's existence is to form connections with the world outside our walls. **Our new faith leader would be invited to help the congregation search out ways to intentional outreach, to North Bay's sometimes suffering downtown or elsewhere.**

Thirdly, this is a faith community that is willing to take risks. It has been an Affirming congregation since 2013, the only one in the city. The desire to welcome LGBTQ2s people in a thoughtful and public way has led to a long, occasionally fractious journey. We are still on it. We are also a Blue Umbrella congregation, where people with dementia are fully part of the life of the community. **Our new faith leader would have the opportunity to be part of a community that is grateful for the gifts of every member, and hopes to accompany all those who are made anxious by what is unknown to them.**

Fourth: This is a faith community that yearns for affectionate ties with one another. This is a post-pandemic highest priority. **Our new faith leader would be called to help us find our way into circles of community that are either new or re-born:** coffee groups, study groups, pastoral care groups, justice groups, for example. "We all know people who have left our church," said one member. "We need to talk to these people to find out why they and to encourage them to return."

Fifth: This is a faith community that cares for the earth. When one Indigenous member offers the prayers of the people, she always prays for the water, with gratitude. Many members have heard those prayers and been changed. Some members fought to protect our beautiful Trout Lake from an oil spill. **Our new faith leader would accompany/enable those members who seek a closer relationship with Mother Earth** and would welcome the opportunity to live in a city surrounded by lakes and forest.

Sixth: This is a church of elderly people. We could be generative, teaching those generations who follow us the very things they might lack, but which we have in abundance: vulnerability to each other, face-to-face encounters with the divine, and a fierce sense of responsibility for the city in which we are found. At their best, the elderly are more willing to take bold, realistic, practical steps than younger people might think. Amalgamation. Selling the building. Regenerating the building. Filling our building with so much joy that others will want to join us. Making long-range plans. These are all on the table. **Our new faith leader** (some want the skills of the ordained, others simply want “strength and dedication to being church”) **will support and encourage us in these tasks.**

We believe St Andrew’s exists as a community of faith because it embodies all these commitments described above. In short — like other churches — it is doing its best to live out the commands of the gospel. We would welcome a leader who can encourage, support, prod and teach us to do that, and we promise to make them a part of our very interesting faith community.

