

A HISTORY OF ST. ANDREW'S, ST. LAMBERT

Today we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of our congregation of St. Andrew's. Why 100 years? There has actually been a Presbyterian church in St. Lambert for much longer than that. St. Cuthbert's Presbyterian congregation was organized in the 1880's and a church was built in 1892, more or less across the street from where St. Barnabas Anglican now stands. But a hundred years ago fierce controversy raged in Canada over the creation of the United Church, a project to unite Protestant churches into one big new church. The Methodist and Congregationalist churches were on board, but about a third of the Presbyterians feared that much that was good about their tradition would be lost in the new arrangement. The way the argument played out locally is that the 170 members of St. Cuthbert's Presbyterian church voted to join with the Methodist congregation to form St. Lambert United Church, which now stands a block that way. But 111 members voted against the arrangement and opted to remain the continuing Presbyterian witness in the community. You may have noticed the little monument of brick and stone on the lawn beside the church. It is the cornerstone of old St. Cuthbert's, retrieved when that building was demolished in 1958. It symbolizes the claim that St. Andrew's is the true continuation and inheritor of that Presbyterian past.

Because the building and the assets went with the majority, the continuing congregation had to start from scratch. It was a gutsy decision, one borne of faith and hope. They met for worship in what is now St. Lambert Elementary school (just a block over there), led mostly by theological students from Presbyterian College - although there was support from the continuing Presbytery of Montreal, especially the congregation of St. Andrew and St. Paul, the big and wealthy congregation of Sherbrooke St. which had also voted to remain outside the union.

In the absence of clergy, the members of the congregation showed surprising amounts of energy, initiative and generosity. An Every Member canvas raised \$2500 for support of the church - big bucks in those days - enough to call a minister for a year. A committee was struck to buy land on which to build a church, and membership soon grew to 128. A choir of 10 members began and a Sunday school of 42 teachers and students established which soon grew

to 76. A Women's Missionary Society group started, and a Women's League, which organized sales and teas, dinners and various fundraisers. At the end of 1925, the books were \$1,306 in the black. It was an impressive start.

In 1927, the present church building was constructed, with a \$15,000 gift from the church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, substantial contributions (\$6,875) by members, a \$6,000 mortgage and the very considerable volunteer labours of the architect and church member, Mr. R.G. Heughan, who brought the project in below budget. The continued involvement of St. Andrew and St. Paul's was reflected at the laying of the corner stone, the opening service and the dedication of the organ in 1932 - a recycled theatre organ, made obsolete when silent films were replaced by the talkies.

But St. Andrew's showed that it deserved the help that it received by its continuing vitality. The Sunday School soon grew to 122 and a drama group (The Excelsior Club) was established. Despite occasional concerns expressed by the Session about some of the plays, its first production, "Green Stockings" generated a profit of \$200 for the church coffers.

Some of this enthusiastic fund-raising generated anxiety in Session which passed a resolution in 1928, expressing the hope that,

as this sacred edifice has been consecrated to holy purposes, the congregation will ever seek to preserve its sanctity, refraining from the use of tobacco and such social amusements as dancing and card playing within the house of God; and further as all offerings in support of Church ordinances should be an act of worship the Session urges that all organizations constituting a part of the congregation will ever abstain from any questionable means of raising church funds particularly by card parties and raffles.....

The issue of smoking would continue to be a source of irritation for decades, with members of the Board of Managers and young people continuing to resist the Session ban. A compromise was eventually settled on that smoking would be permitted in the church building except on Sundays. How times have changed.

Controversial topics were debated by the Young People's Society. One involved the resolution: "The Modern Business Girl makes a better wife than the "Home Girl". The verdict, surprisingly, was in favour of the Modern Business girl. Or, if you didn't like debates, there was the Men's Association which sponsored bowling and curling events, a Christian Girl's in Training group, the Wilkie Mission Band for children and a model aeroplane club for boys with a membership of 20. It is astonishing to realize to what extent member's lives revolved around activities at the church, and the commitment over years of those who provided leadership. For members, the church seems to have been the only show in town. There were no Sunday morning hockey games and the stores were all closed, of course.

The economic depression in the 1930's saw diminished incomes and the slow growth of the population on the South Shore, which resulted in a financial crisis. Although membership increased during the lengthy ministry of the Rev. Henry Lee, money was so scarce that the money owed him would only be paid to his estate after his death in 1941. There were no funds to pay for an organist so volunteers filled in. The coal merchant had to wait for full payment until the renewed prosperity of the Second World War.

But people soldiered on, even if the initial enthusiasm had waned. The Women's League continued to fund-raise and, in 1936, undertook to run Sunday Night movies in the Church Hall. That same year, women also began the Goforth Circle Women's Missionary Society group. For a church in which there were no female elders or clergy, it is notable how much energy and leadership in the church came from women.

Things stabilized financially in the 1940's as the war economy took hold although numbers in the congregation remained more or less constant, hovering between 270 and 300. Rev. Jean Faurot, was originally appointed as stated supply in 1940 but by the end of 1942, the congregation was in a financial position to call him as their minister. Clearly, some of the tension resulting from the fight in 1925 was beginning to heal. Joint summer services with St. Lambert United church began, along with a Summer Bible school that included St. Barnabas. There were also joint mid-week services between the three churches. Who knew that ecumenical relations flourished in the 1940's?

The 1950's were boom years for churches in Canada, including St. Andrew's in a growing St. Lambert. Membership grew to its high point of 445 in 1954. Money was plentiful and Dr. Koffend's stipend was raised to \$4,000, plus housing and car allowance. Givings for the first half of 1956 were up 10% over the same period the previous year, and the Sunday School was growing. Like many congregations in the 1950's, St. Andrew's began to think about expanding and the need for a Christian education building. It did not happen immediately but seeds were sown and a committee established.

Congregational prosperity continued to increase during the tenure of the next minister, Gardiner Dalzell and in 1957, the congregation acquired the former Palmer Printing property across the street from the church - which was eventually to become the Christian Education Centre. Printing is a messy business, so many hours were required by the men on the Board of Managers including Andrew Seath, Candy's father, to clean and renovate the building for its new purpose. To help cover the costs, the building was rented during the week to local High School and, later, to a kindergarten. Rentals are not a new development.

There were also hopes and ambitions for church extension. A Sunday-school was established in Preville in 1959, which met in the town hall. It is hard to imagine a similar arrangement being made today, but in those days churches were closely linked to the larger civic community. People operated within the assumptions of Christendom: Canada was a Christian country and churches needed to be supported. The Sunday School eventually became the house church, St. James, and in 1964, the Rev. John Pace was called as its minister. The congregation would continue until 1971 when declining numbers prompted an amalgamation with St. Andrew's, adding 25 families to the congregation. This valiant but ultimately unsuccessful attempt at church extension signaled that the 1960's were not as hospitable to church growth as the 1950's had been. Nevertheless, 1966 saw St. Andrew's purchase a manse and construct the present Christian Education Building. It was designed by Robert Heughan, son of the man who had designed and supervised the construction of the church. His older brother is remembered on one of the two marble plaques in the sanctuary, in memory of the two men who died during the Second World War of the many from the congregation who served.

If the 1960's saw the end of the post war church boom in Canada, St. Andrew's was blessed, in Art Van Seters, with a minister who accurately read the signs of the times. With the addition of the families from St. James, membership remained almost as high as it had been in the 1950's (435) and, under Van Seter's leadership, the congregation began to turn outward towards the world - a very 1960's theme. The number of groups within the congregation were reduced and consolidated so as to focus on projects to benefit the community at large: Meals on Wheels, the Clothing Depot and Head Start, a nursery for pre-school children from low-income families. A volunteer crisis line for those requiring help with drug abuse was established and ecumenical pastoral services to the CEGEP Champlain College were begun. The organization now called Ecumenical Community Service was formed to provide food for those in need and to arrange visits to medical appointments. Forums and discussion groups were organized on such topics as "The gap between the Church and World Poverty", "The gap between the French and English in Quebec," and "Mental Illness and the Community." Drama and discussion groups were introduced into worship, and Dr. Van Seter's was instrumental in establishing an ecumenical lay school of theology. But the exuberance of the 1960's would be accompanied by a slow membership decline in the next decade, aggravated in Quebec by the political tensions that saw the Parti Quebecois elected in 1976.

The 1970's would again see concerns about finances and the practise of pledging, which had been discontinued in the 1960's, was again placed on the agenda. Membership declined to 277 although the congregation still rose to the challenge of sponsoring a family of Vietnamese Boat people in 1980. As the exuberant optimism of the 1960's gave way to the culture wars that followed, St. Andrew's seems to have moved in a more conservative direction. It co-sponsored with the Baptist Church James Dobson's film series, "Focus on the Family" in which Dobson championed a return to traditional family values and Biblically- mandated gender roles. The assumption that we were living in a Christian society - so strong until the 1960's - was clearly fading. Declining numbers would be met with church growth campaigns. But there was generally little to show for them. In 1980, the national Presbyterian church embarked on an ambitious campaign to double its membership in a decade. Dr. Sauer, only recently arrived as minister at St. Andrew's, suddenly left for Toronto to head up the program. But not only did

membership not grow, it continued to decline and the program was cut short. The church had moved from the centre of society to the fringes. That is the abiding problem that we face. How are we to live in exile as a counter-cultural people in a thoroughly secularized society? In the 1980's, during the years of the Sam Priestly's ministry, St. Andrew's mounted an ambitious every member visitation program and distributed brochures throughout the South Shore to make people aware of our existence. But such efforts seemingly bore little fruit. The downward trend continued. Part of the story is that St. Lambert had changed from an 85% English speaking city to an overwhelmingly francophone one.

In terms of numbers, we are back to where we started in the early days of St. Cuthbert's. But we face a more hostile environment, and the church is no longer at the centre of people's lives as it was for a good chunk of the 20th century. It has become one activity among others.

So what now? As we look back to the glory days of the 1950's and 60's, it is hard not to be nostalgic. But it is a temptation to be resisted. Over the years, an ethnically Scottish church has become much more diverse and we are now real estate rich.

Not long after Anita and I arrived at St. Andrew's in 1992, one of the elders told us that St. Andrew's had five years left and that he had made plans for where to go after that. That was more than thirty years ago. Sure enough, numbers continued to decline, but somehow St. Andrew's just kept on going. People came. People left. But the routine of Sunday worship and baptism and communion and funerals continued. We kept on keeping on. It made me think about the story in the Bible of Elijah and the widow at Zarephath. There was a drought and a famine in the land. The LORD came to Elijah and said, "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

"As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die."

Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.'"

She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

May it be so for St. Andrew's.