

# *Inviting Wonder*

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## *Thanks*

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## Open and Broken

### *The little church around the corner*

When his friend and colleague died, actor Joseph Jefferson sought a church for the funeral. In 1870 New York City, this proved a challenge. When the clergy heard that Joseph's friend George Holland had been an actor, they refused to do his funeral: actors were considered unworthy of Christian burial. One Episcopal priest dismissed Joseph, saying he himself would not bury an actor but "there is a little church around the corner that does that sort of thing." That church, The Church of the Transfiguration, offered both funeral rites and hospitality, and thus began a long relationship between that congregation and New York City's creative community. The little church around the corner has the openness to artists who see differently, an openness that set the stage for the congregation's mission. Its doors are open to difference.

### *Open Doors Get a Makeover*

A thousand years ago, Cordoba, Spain was the cosmopolitan city of its age, a rare place where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived and worked together in harmony. The centre of scholarship, cutting edge science and medicine, Cordoba held the world's largest library, and was a center of art, music and poetry. It also served as the capital of western Islam, and its awe-inspiring mosque was a pilgrimage site second only to Mecca. But in the year 1236, the city was captured by the Christian King, Ferdinand. The mosque was also conquered, and became a Roman Catholic cathedral. Mercifully, much of the inspiring architecture was preserved, including 580 amazing pillars. In its days as a mosque, the many doors stood open to the streets around. Visually, from inside, the eye would follow the forest of pillars out into the open courtyard, an urban forest of orange trees. Other doors opened out onto the market place, a reminder that all aspects of life are holy, even something as mundane as buying a bag of figs. All of this was purposeful design, uniting the sacred and the secular. The mosque's Christian makeover closed up the doors, most of them

permanently, and the sense of expansiveness was lost. The church cut off the world. The losses in that broken relationship are on both sides.

### ***This book's for you...***

If these stories of brokenness and healing stir something in your spirit, this book's for you. *Inviting Wonder* is for church folks who want their faith community to embrace the arts with their promise of new ways of seeing. Sometimes, the seeing will be beauty, sometimes uncomfortable in the tradition of the prophets, sometimes a glimpse into a new world, sometimes a glimpse of the kin(g)dom of God. This is also a book for artists seeking a studio or a home for their work in a church, giving a sense of context and of a congregation's needs and concerns. *Inviting Wonder* explores the relationship of the contemporary Protestant church to the arts. Two chapters explore the foundational themes of hospitality and piazza, ancient Christian practices being rediscovered by the church. Hospitality is a spiritually demanding discipline, much more counter-cultural than we can imagine. Piazza theology invites us to open our sacred spaces for the use of the wider community, an opening that challenges us to the spiritual discipline of generous giving. Hospitality and piazza each address the church's relationship with the wider world, and apply to the church's relationship with the arts.

### ***Living it out***

On a sabbatical journey in 2010, i explored and experienced holy spaces offering hospitality to the arts. i began by experiencing the hospitality of the Benedictine community of St. John's Abbey, Minnesota, where hospitality is a rule and a practice. Chapters of this book offer congregational snapshots of churches engaged in hospitality to the arts, both in Canada and the United States. St. James Anglican Church, Saskatoon, has re-invented its parish hall as a community arts center and named it The Refinery. Trinity St. Paul's United Church, Toronto, names itself a Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts and has a long and respectful relationship with one of the

world's top baroque orchestras. Sydenham Street United Church, Kingston, Ontario empowered congregational artists (visual, musical and poetic visual, musical and poetic) in a resurrection project. South of the border, Trinity Episcopal, Cleveland, embraced piazza theology, re-creating their church building and grounds as a town square, a sacred public space for arts, justice work and spirituality. A few blocks away, Old Stone Presbyterian Church boasts a new art gallery with an edgy mandate. Each of these congregations is mending the broken relationship between the church and the arts, between the church and artists.

### ***Open and Broken***

The founding of Protestantism was tragically accompanied by the destruction of church art, as sculptures, stained glass and icons were literally smashed. Some 500 years later, there still lingers a Protestant suspicion of the arts. *Inviting Wonder* is a mosaic, an attempt to gather and piece some of the shards and broken bits of the smashed relationship between Protestant Christianity and the arts. On offer in the pages that follow are *tesserae* – bits and shards of many colours. Picking up the pieces is the beginning of healing this broken relationship, as this prairie story shows.

### ***Mr. Pasco***

Even dressed for the weather of Saskatoon, it was cold and dirty work – cold because it was January, dirty because it was combing through the ashes of what had been St. James Anglican Church. For the second time in its history, St. James had burnt down. Day by day, Mr. Pasco, a long-time member of St. James, sifted the rubble, ice, ash, burnt timbers, charred Bibles and prayer books. Day be demanding day, Mr. Pasco patiently dug shards of stained glass out of the wintery rubble. He dug through ice and soot and snow and ash in search of what was once beautiful, whole, inspiring and now was smashed – dirty, sharp-edged, fragmented, broken. The bits of glass were taken home, cleaned, sorted by colour, and put safely away. When St. James Anglican rebuilt, those

pieces were given to Saskatoon stained glass artist Lee Brady to create a new window, a new symbol for the renewed congregation.

May *Inviting Wonder* begin your own journey of gathering shards and piecing a new peace amongst the church, the arts and artists.

## Getting Smashed

Some potato-faced medieval thugs have overturned an altar, the chalice lies on its side on the floor. *Protestants behaving badly* is the title i gave this sketch, a cartoon from a children's brochure i picked up at a Dutch art museum. In the cartoon, a sledge-hammer wielding hoodlum stands astride a toppled and beheaded statue, the hammer raised high for further destruction. One of his vandal pals is pulling on a rope, trying to topple another plaster saint, while a third, hammer in hand, is on his way up a ladder heading for the stained glass windows. In the name of Protestantism – then a new expression of Christianity – art was getting smashed. To prove the old religion wrong, violence was done to art.

### *Early Messages*

The cartoon shows part of our history, the roots of our Protestant dis-ease with art in church. For many of us, the discomfort was planted in our early years. Here are two wee stories illustrating that. In one, a 1950's Maritime boy gets the message there is something decidedly foreign about a different expression of faith; in the second, a younger me wrestles with visual art and its implications for the afterlife.

~A small boy sits at the Sunday dinner table, hoping that when the aunt beside him serves him the peas, she'll make sure he gets the pat of butter melting on top. He likes the butter, and mostly likes the aunt. He doesn't like having to stay in his Sunday scratchy wool trousers, but that is a small price to pay if his aunt will make sure he gets the butter pat on his plate. He's too short to see if the butter is still there as the big bowl gets passed around, but when it is at last in his aunt's strong, farm woman hands, he can see the bright yellow against the green. She spoons it onto his plate with a wink. An uncle at the other end of the big table is talking in a voice like he is telling a secret. The boy pricks up his ears. He likes secrets, likes to know the things the adults know. Even though he is still small, one day he will be big, and he needs to know these adult things. His uncle is

talking about a neighbour, and he hears in the hushed secret tone the words *the Catholics*. Several around the table, using the same kind of voice offer their opinions on *the Catholics*, those with multitudinous statues of saints in their churches and garish pictures of Jesus tortured on the cross. The boy is too young to grasp the community's long-held rivalries and suspicions, but not too young to read the nuances in the adults' conversation. *The Catholics*, if nothing else, are not us, are different, other, strange. So strange, that when there is a pause in the conversation, the little boy asks, "But what language do they speak, the Catholics?"

~My mom and dad, in the front seat of the family car, were talking about how much we had all enjoyed an overnight visit with family friends at their home in a nearby city. Gord – Mr. Riding to me – had taken up a new hobby, and excitedly showed us his latest wood-carvings. He spent a fair bit of time showing me a squirrel he had carved, and explaining about the grain of the wood. The visit had been full of laughter and good times. Still, i couldn't help but voice my concern from the back seat: "It's too bad Mr. Riding won't be going to heaven."

"What makes you think that?" my father asked curiously.

"Because it's against the 10 commandments to make a graven image," i replied solemnly, having learned the commandments in Sunday School in the basement of Zion Wexford United Church. My father laughed and said it wasn't quite the same thing, but i thought about that carved squirrel for a long time, and felt sad about Mr. Riding's future. Graven images, like statues of the saints in the neighbourhood Catholic church, were somehow suspect, somehow unholy, somehow an affront to true religion.

### ***Where We've Been***

The term "Protestant art" is not quite an oxymoron (a self-contradicting term, like "airplane food" or "military intelligence"), but over the centuries we Protestants have been known for our austerities. We are much more the little brown church in the vale than the ornate cathedral. Our



primary art forms have been oral (music, preaching, prayer), with stained glass serving our visual needs. We are deeply marked by our Puritan suspicion of the arts. As a former parishioner said to me, when asked to participate in a chancel drama, “I don’t hold with play acting.” Our relationship with the arts – and thus our relationship with artists – is broken.

Our western, Protestant argument with the arts has deep, historic roots. These roots are twisted, and unravelling them takes a better grasp of both church history and art history than i possess. But it is beyond strange that the church was once the patron of the arts (Sistine Chapel, Bach’s St Matthew’s Passion) over time has become suspicious and hostile, deeming only the narrowest range of art forms acceptable in Protestant churches. This broken relationship is like a smashed glass whose fragments have flown every which way.

### ***Art Shapes Belief***

Shards of glass and cut stone are the raw materials of mosaic, an art form dating back to pre-Christian times, and taken up by early Christians. Mosaics at some point moved from the floor to the ceilings of churches, where intricate piecing of shimmering colour depicts images of the emerging new faith we now call Christianity. The art of these mosaics gave our ancestors in the faith a wee taste of heaven, a place of pastoral brilliance in a world where life for most was still short, brutish and harsh. For centuries, Christian art in Christian churches depicted not crucifixion and suffering, but paradise, complete with starry heavens, golden sunlight, blossoming meadows. Scholars Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker (*Saving Paradise*, 2008) say that images of Jesus’ violent death did not begin to appear until Christian missions themselves took on violence as a conversion tactic under Charlemagne (742-814). Images of the peaceable kingdom were overtaken by images of crucifixion. Christianity itself shifted along with the art, as “holy war” was justified and glorified. As well as great works of good, Christians also bear the legacy of the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, colonialism, cultural genocide attempts and other forms of violence, all in the name of

Jesus. These new works of art glorifying Jesus' violent death helped create a new world, a world in which Christians forsook the peaceable kingdom and became soldiers of the cross. The art that surrounds us creates our world, our ethics, and our spirituality. What the history of the western world might have been like had Christianity held fast to those early images of a paradise that is a peaceable kingdom, we can only dream. But we do know this: it would have been different. Art has the power to create reality.

In my family photo album is a snapshot, circa 1965, of my sister and i ready for a Halloween night of trick or treating. My sister is dressed as a "Gypsy"; me as an "Indian." Where did we get the images we had of those peoples? We grew up in the era of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, *Wagon Train* and *The Lone Ranger*. The art we encountered, commercial and otherwise, shaped and limited our experience of other cultures. It was no accident that my image of being an "Indian" consisted of the plains regalia of feathers and fringes. It was no accident i had no knowledge of living near the woodland aboriginal community of the Six Nations Iroquois confederacy. My image of "Indians" was set by Saturday morning television and John Wayne matinees. Popular art shaped my vision, my sense of history, my attitudes.

### ***A New Ministry: Where We Could Go***

Yet art also challenges reality and dreams new worlds, pointing our faith in new directions. From cave painting to Caravaggio, banners to power point, dervishes to song writers, poets to playwrights, faith finds expression and exploration in the arts. Sometimes provocative (Almuth Lutkenhuis' sculpture *Crucified Woman*), sometimes ecstatic (Alvin Ailey's choreography in *Revelations*), always offering experiences provoking wonder and wondering. Even the starkest Presbyterian kirk in the Hebrides has an aesthetic – stark, yes; zen-like, yes, but carefully, artistically created. Although we Protestants – at least in our churches – have a troubled relationship with the arts, we also know the arts as both prophet and pastor, daring to speak of things that matter. Most

of us have more art in our homes than we will see in our churches; most of us meet our need for art in galleries and movie houses and concert halls, not in our churches. There is something broken in our Protestant relationship with the arts.

To be sure, the relationship between the church and the arts is not the only broken thing in our world. The jagged edges of poverty, human rights abuses, climate change, genocide and war also properly claim our attention as people of faith. One might argue that art is frivolous in the face of such suffering, that art is a frill, a distraction or even an opiate. Why should people of faith be worried about their buildings offering hospitality to the arts when there are so many urgent, life or death claims on us?

A gift that most churches have is the gift of space. Our buildings belong to us, are supported financially by us and cared for by us. And our buildings can be a gift to our communities, offering beautiful public space where life, art and spiritualities can intersect and interact. As our town squares become increasingly privatized and coffee shops and malls market themselves as “community centres” but exercise corporate control, local arts are increasingly being left landless. What if churches were to become cinemas, concert halls, theatres, galleries, performance spaces as well as places of worship? What if we widened our practice of Christian hospitality to open our spaces to local artistic communities? What if we welcomed the ways artists see the pain of our world and the possibilities of something different as part of our ministry in the community? What if, like Mr. Pascoe, we welcomed the smashed fragments of our hurting world, and saw our buildings as the studios where artists might make mosaics out of the broken bits? Our buildings have the gift of space. How might we offer that gift to actors and playwrights, dancers, visual artists, composers, poets, and thus to the wider community?

***Seeing Anew: An Example***

It was a happy accident to be in Toronto to visit Trinity St. Paul's United Church when the Luminato festival was on. A week-long festival of arts and creativity, Luminato's diverse offerings spanned ballet to Bruce Cockburn, magic to opera and orchestral works, literary readings to provocative theatre. Anthony Black's play, *Homage*, contained a scene that crystallized for me the necessity of art, and particularly arts in the church.

Based on a true Canadian story, *Homage* explores the role of art, particularly art created for public spaces. Hayden Davies comes late to the life of an artist, but with the encouragement of his life partner, Eva, becomes a sculptor of bold design. Answering a call for submissions from a small town seeking a new look to their main square, Hayden and Eva attend a town council meeting, imagining that Hayden has won the competition. In the scene below, pay attention to the stage directions...

### Scene from *Homage*

*(Characters are: Hayden, Eva, Mayor, Earl, Edna, Mary and George)*

#### **TOWN SQUARE**

*The town councillors enter, led by the MAYOR. EARL carries technical drawings. HAYDN and EVA enter from a different direction. The MAYOR and HAYDN shake hands.*

MAYOR: Mr. Davies.

HAYDN: Please. Call me Haydn. This is my wife Eva.

MAYOR: Nice to meet you. Thank you so much for making the trip. I know it's a long way.

HAYDN: Not at all. If it helps to give you a clearer sense of the proposal it's worth it to me.

MAYOR: We're meeting with the ten finalists for exactly that reason.

HAYDN: Oh. I see.

MAYOR: So? *(he waits)* Tell us about this.

*Beat.*

HAYDN: What would you like to know?

EARL: Well, first off we'd like to talk about the wood. We're just a little concerned about how it's going to weather.

HAYDN: Well you have to understand, that's part of the design. The cedar will turn grey but there's a beauty in seeing the wood age. Become silver. Just like wooden shingles. As long as you maintain the lamination, there's no reason why it shouldn't stand for centuries.

MAYOR: Which brings us to the next point: The cost of ongoing maintenance.

EDNA: It's just that we hadn't thought about the annual maintenance cost.

EARL: We figured after it's built we'd be done with it.

HAYDN: Well, the maintenance is minimal but essential. I mean, you wouldn't hang a painting on your wall and never dust it.

EDNA: Did you think about using a different material?

HAYDN: No.

EVA: It would be quite a different sculpture then, don't you think?

MARY: It might be a worthwhile compromise

HAYDN: I have no int-

GEORGE: But, Mary, don't you think the wood gives a much-needed warmth to the square.

*Beat.*

MARY: Well, the square has felt rather cold ever since the recent error in civic planning.

EARL: You know, in the drawings here it's sort of hard to imagine how it's going to stand up. I can't imagine the thing supporting its own weight.

HAYDN: Well, I-

GEORGE: No Earl. Look. (*he points to the drawings*) You just anchor the footings with concrete on the inside of the structure. That'll give you some counterweight. Look. The weight rests on these points here, not here. It's no problem at all.

EARL: Oh yeah. That'd work. Sort of cantilever it.

GEORGE: Yeah. Exactly.

*Silence as they all study the drawings.*

MAYOR: Is that what you had in mind?

HAYDN: Yes. That's exactly right.

EDNA: You know what I don't get is (and I'm sorry if this just sounds stupid, but I guess I'll be the one to say it), what is it supposed to *be*.

*Beat. HAYDN looks to EVA.*

HAYDN: I don't think I can really answer your question. But maybe I can give you a better sense of what I think it will *do*.

I've taken some inspiration from the surrounding architecture and environment. For instance,...

*HAYDN begins walk around the square, adopting the different perspective views of the sculpture and referencing drawings that correspond to each view. As he moves from position to position, more and more of the council members start to follow him and see what he describes.*

...as you come towards the square from King Street from this direction, you would see how the silhouette of the top of the sculpture is like ramparts. You can see on the drawing there. They mirror the castellations of the court-house on the opposite side of the square.

*He moves.*

Coming up Monroe Street, the sculpture is offset against the post office. It's almost a planar composition. Like a painting.

*He moves. They follow. He's flipping to a new drawing.*

From George Street, this element here drives the eye upward and you can see, over the top of the bank, you can see the point of Talking Hill. (*pointing at the drawing*) The angle of the top of this element here actually follows the slope of the hill.

*He moves. They follow. From Duke street: (he flips to the next drawing)* You can see how the suppleness of the curve in this line here reflects the way the river rounds out its bend beyond the park.

*He moves. They follow. He shows yet another drawing.*

From Main Street, the picture is fractured, disjunctive against the neo classical style of town hall. It's about contrast: disorder backgrounded by order.

*He moves to the last entry point of the square. They follow.*

And last of all, here on Woodsworth Avenue, it's set against the new library. From this approach, the perspective creates the sense of a little portal through which you can see the doorway of the new library.

*Pause*

MAYOR: And you feel you'll be able to execute it for the ten thousand?

HAYDN: Well, I...

GEORGE: I did a rough costing and I think my guys could get it done for that. It'd be close. But Haydn said he won't take a fee. And neither will I.<sup>1</sup>

As one by one the characters joined Haydn and caught the vision, this scene was, for me, a moment of forehead slapping – *now i get it!* That art is not only something to look at, but something to look *through*, opening us to new ways of seeing. Arts can be decorative, yes, but they also shape how we see and frame what we see. Sometimes, they not only *frame* what we see, but *determine* what we see. In

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Black, *Homage*, 2btheatre, used with permission.

this scene from *Homage*, the town council *sees* what they have long ago stopped seeing – the wondrous architecture of their court house, the beautiful way the post office sits in the town square, the pinnacle of Talking Hill, the supple curve of the river, the portal of the library, a place that invites people into other worlds. Suddenly, the commonplace became precious, even beautiful. The art with which we surround ourselves determines what we see and how we see. In 1968, the astronauts on Apollo 8 thought they were going to the moon, but instead discovered the earth. The “earthrise” photo they took from space helped humanity see the beauty and fragility of our planet home. Through the art of photography, many came to see in a new way the vulnerability of planet earth, awakening the need for the care of creation.

These are spiritual transformations, and it is fitting that one of the gifts churches can offer our communities is hospitality to the arts so that we may see anew. It won’t always be pretty – we will need to see scars and wounds – the broken shards. But we will also catch glimpses of paradise and redemption – the new creation.

***Getting Smashed Questions:***

For small group discussion or personal reflection.

Can you imagine Christians smashing (or otherwise destroying) art today? What about trying to censor art (some Christian leaders have tried to remove the Harry Potter novels from school libraries; some have tried to remove the writings of Margaret Laurence from curricula; some have urged youth to turn in their “Satanic” music to be burned)?

Is there some art that elicits a censoring or even destroying response in you?

What art is present in your place of worship? What does that art mean to you? How does that meaning change over time? Is there a kind of art that speaks to your spirit that you would like to experience in your church, either in worship or at another time?

Thinking about the scene from *Homage* and the photo from Apollo 8, talk about a time that art helped you see something new or something familiar in a new way. What art changes your vision or view point? Stretches your faith to new places?

Mosaic and stained glass are both art forms that use broken pieces to create. Have there been times in your church experience when the church has rejected or “broken” art? What broken pieces in our relationship with the arts need to be brought together? How might your church play a part in that?

## Hospitality: Letting Go

### *Experiencing Hospitality: One on One*

My first visit with Anna challenged me deeply. She buzzed me in, and i took the elevator up to her tiny apartment. In her eighty-plus years, Anna had experienced an accumulation of physical illness and disabilities. When i met her, her tiny body was stooped with a pronounced hunch-back, her hands were gnarled with arthritis, her mobility depended on both a cane and a thick orthotic boot, and the cane's whiteness indicated visual problems. Going at Anna's pace, it took a very long time in a very small apartment to make our way to her kitchen table. i felt badly that my visit was of great physical cost to Anna, who now was asking if i preferred tea or coffee. i could see the plate of neatly arranged cookies under plastic wrap, waiting on the counter. Her steps to the sink seemed so slow, so tortured to me, as she carefully filled the kettle, then warmed the teapot, filled the milk jug. My offers of help were rebuffed with a wave of her twisted hand, and, blessedly, i realized how important it was to Anna to make tea for her minister, how important to her dignity it was for her to serve me. The hospitality Anna offered me that autumn afternoon was, in many ways, very like the hospitality ministers usually experience on home visits, very like the hospitality any of us experience when visiting a friend.

And, it was utterly unlike that easy hospitality. Anna's hospitality came at a physical cost to her, and it was crucial to her own sense of human dignity that she put the hot, heavy teapot on a tray, and carry it, limpingly, to the table. My own need to help, my need to be useful was trumped by Anna's need to offer hospitality. My role, in this case, was to receive and not to rob Anna of her role by "helping" her.

The calling of hospitality is a call to right relationship, a call to see one another as equals, as welcome guest and generous host. My visit with Anna was transgressive in a culture that views elderly, infirm women as having nothing to offer. It was transgressive in calling me (comparatively



young and able-bodied) to graciously receive. None of this was spoken over the steaming cups of black tea and the Peak Freans assorted cookies, at least not spoken aloud. But when i left, there was a smile on Anna's weary face, and a heartfelt invitation to please come again and enjoy her hospitality.

### ***Experiencing Hospitality: In Community***

The picture in my head was clearly the wrong one. As i drove up the long road to St. John's Abbey (Minnesota), the church loomed large on the hill. i had come on Maundy Thursday, to spend the beginning of my three month Sabbatical experiencing Benedictine hospitality over Easter weekend. Not knowing that i had booked in to the world's largest men's Benedictine monastery, i was expecting it would be a simple matter to find the Guest House. Indeed, i imagined there would be the Abbey church, the monks' residence, the Guest House and a few out buildings. Exhausted by a day-long drive, the large campus felt less like my destination and unhappily like even more journey. i found the information booth in the Great Hall, where i told the student behind the desk that i was here for a retreat. He shuffled some papers, looking even more bewildered than i, then picked up the phone. As he repeated what i had said into the phone, i realized my mistake. When he passed me the receiver, i was greeted by the gentle voice of a Brother. "My apologies," i spluttered, "i'm here to stay in the Guest House for the weekend. This Protestant gal was using the word 'retreat'. i'm sorry for the confusion." "No need to apologize," was the kind reply, "it is a retreat for you." The mistake was mine; the warm graciousness made me feel welcome.

The Rule of St. Benedict is a sixth century text shaping the day to day life of members of the Benedictine order and other Christians down through the ages. The Benedictines are credited with saving Christian Europe from the abyss of the Dark Ages, fostering a love of science and care for creation, creating Gregorian chant and other worship arts. In their community where worship and work are one, hospitality is seen as a form of worship, a way of glorifying God. At St. John's, a

permanent plaque stands outdoors between the Abbey Church and the Great Hall, the very place where i had fetched up seeking direction:

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said:

“I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35). Proper honor must be

shown “to all, especially to those who share our faith” (Gal. 6:10) and to pilgrims.

That Easter weekend, the monastery brothers were generous to me, helping me through an unfamiliar form of worship with a minimum of fuss, touring me around the impressive Abbey church, and freely offering both the joys and the short-comings of the life of this community.

### ***Hospitality: Gift, not Debt***

Risky relationships are part of Jesus’ challenge. In Luke 14:12-13, Jesus is a guest at the home of a religious leader for Sabbath supper. In the midst of receiving hospitality, Jesus offers an uncomfortable challenge when he says to the host, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, *because they cannot repay you...*” Getting rid of the notion of being repaid is the deepest challenge to hospitality, both individually and for churches. What’s the point of baptising babies if their parents don’t return to church? What of the street person who shows up for coffee time after church but never for the worship service? Being hospitable in such instances transgresses our culture’s expected reciprocity in favour of generous, faithful hospitality. Risky, yes; uncomfortable, perhaps. The cultural transgression is to mix race, class, ethnic background, religion, gender, orientation with no thought of making *them* like *us*. Can we be faithful without expectation of being rewarded?

Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan (*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1995), asks us to imagine a hospitality that not only may have no reward, but could be risky. Imagine if a beggar

shows up at your door. There are several options, each with an added layer of challenge. You could give the beggar a bag lunch to go. You could invite the beggar inside to your kitchen for a sandwich. You could invite the beggar to sit down in the dining room and eat with your family. Or you could invite the beggar to come back on Saturday night and join with your friends and family for a party you've been planning. Which would you most like to do? Which are you most likely to really do?

### ***Biblical Reflections on Hospitality***

Our churches are places of sharing space. In the shared space of worship, we hear stories of faithful hospitality, from the beginning, in Genesis, when Abraham and Sarah show hospitality to strangers (Genesis 18:1-8). Throughout his life, Jesus offers hospitality; he welcomes children (Matt. 19:13-15), asks his disciples to rely on hospitality (Luke 10: 1-9), relies on hospitality himself (Luke 10:38), and teaches hospitality (Luke 14:15-24). In the first three gospels, Jesus instructs the disciples to borrow a room for the Passover, which will be their Last Supper together (Mark and Luke call it the “guest room”). In John’s telling of the story, Jesus shows hospitality to the disciples by taking the role of a servant and washing their feet (John 13:3-5). After the crucifixion, when Jesus appears as a stranger to two disciples on their way to Emmaus, the disciples offer him a robust hospitality – “they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us...’” (Luke 24:29).

Hospitality is a mark of faithfulness, a godly practice, a Christian calling. “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35). We might take comfort in the oft-quoted verse from Hebrews – “do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2) – but there is a hint of reward – who *wouldn't* want to entertain an angel?

Perhaps the most challenging model of hospitality for us is the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in which an outcast/enemy (the Samaritan) offers generous hospitality to one who had fallen among thieves. This hospitality is offered at financial cost to the Samaritan, and likely

some social cost, too. What would be the reaction within his own community that he had helped an enemy? The Samaritan's hospitality is also offered without any expectation of reward – the one he helps is unconscious, and he is not likely to see him again. Those who passed by on the other side were as driven then as we are now by a task-oriented culture. The Samaritan's hospitality – even while he himself was on hostile turf, underlines that hospitality is counter-cultural.

Diana Butler Bass (*Christianity For the Rest of Us*, 2007) names hospitality as one of the signposts of renewal for mainline Christian churches. She sees hospitality as central to the Christian faith – a practice Christians are called to for the sake of that thing itself. It is in our hospitality that we Christians imitate and enact God's welcome. Therefore, hospitality is not a program carried out by one committee, nor simply the coffee hour following worship. For Butler Bass, hospitality is the very heart of a Christian way of life.

### ***Hospitality: Breaking Down Barriers***

Practicing hospitality breaks down barriers. Many congregations declare “All are welcome” on their church sign. But a rainbow flag on a church sign indicates that territory traditionally hostile to the queer community has done some re-thinking and risking, and is now prepared to be hospitable. An all-white congregation that sings a Korean hymn is expressing a hope for a more diverse congregation, making space for hospitality in their music. A church that makes its building accessible when none of its members (currently) have that need shows hospitality. In a post-Christian culture, something as simple as replacing our traditional fortress-like doors with glass doors so that passers-by might see into what, to them, has always been secret space, denotes a new openness. In breaking down barriers to be hospitable, we are changed.

### ***Hospitality: A Spiritual Practice***

Hospitality is a demanding spiritual practice. In many churches, it has come to mean welcoming new faces, making sure they get coffee and know where to find the washrooms and the

Sunday school, actions important in themselves. Too often, though, these gestures of welcome are accompanied by the hope of reward: that the newcomers will request offering envelopes and sit on committees. This hospitality with strings attached is a tit-for-tat relationship, modelled on our non-church life. If i invite you to dinner at my house, there is an implicit expectation between us that you will invite me to dinner at your house. But what if Christian hospitality is not about reciprocity? What would it look like if Christian hospitality was not about gaining results but letting go of results? What if the way to do the right thing is to do it no matter the results? Here are a few stories of churches that offered hospitality, regardless of results.

### ***The Practice of Hospitable Churches***

In that crowd, Barry Morris and i stood out like the proverbial sore thumbs. We were both working at inner-city Vancouver's First United Church back in the early 1980s, then a church with a tiny congregation and a huge outreach ministry. Advocacy groups abounded in this tough, addicted and poverty stricken neighbourhood, and Barry and i had seen a poster that morning for a new one, ASP, the Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes. We went to the advertised meeting, and the working women there stared at us with deep suspicion, one that grew visibly hostile when we said we were from a church. As the meeting was breaking up, i had an inspiration. "Our church has a photocopier that's available for community groups, if you're looking for a place to run off your bad trick sheets." The next morning, two women from ASP came to the church and ran off their list describing dangerous johns, a list distributed to local sex trade workers, and posted throughout the neighbourhood. They returned a few more times to use the photocopier; then they found another place to do that work.

Around the same time (early 1980s), the Berlin Wall still divided East from West Germany. St. Nikolai Evangelical Lutheran Church in East Germany began to hold weekly prayers for peace. Every Monday night, people gathered at St. Nikolai, recited the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11) and

prayed, then marched peacefully in the streets, calling for democracy. At first, the numbers were small, but a critical mass grew to number in the thousands as Christians and atheists alike, many of them young, gathered to hear the non-violent message of Jesus, then took to the streets. After police met one of these peaceful protests with violence, two days later, St. Nikolai's prayer service was standing room only and some 70,000 people marched peacefully in the streets. It was in the church that people turned their fear to courage, and about a month later, tore down the Berlin Wall. The church is still there today. Its present congregation is small.

On September 11, 2001, St. Paul's Chapel in New York City remained standing, though only a few blocks from the devastation of the attacks on the World Trade Centre. On that terrifying day, St. Paul's opened its doors to firefighters and police officers as a place of respite and support. This hospitality grew to welcome rescue searchers and then, more poignantly, recovery searchers as hope for survivors dimmed. Coffee, meals, conversation and prayer were gifts offered by the congregation. Before long, the church folks were joined by musicians offering the healing gift of their art. St. Paul's was a place of respite and peace, embodying hope in a climate that clamoured for revenge. The church continued this ministry until May of 2002, and continues it in another form to this day. While still home to an active congregation, St. Paul's is also a shrine of remembrance, holding thousands of origami peace cranes and messages of encouragement to firefighters and police from all corners of the world. More than a million people visit St. Paul's annually, paying homage to those who died and joining in prayers for peace. St. Paul's gift of hospitality was, and is, the gift of space.

### ***Hospitality: Letting Go of Results***

First United offered access to a resource (the photocopier and paper), which allowed a vulnerable group to share information about danger with each other. St. Nikolai welcomed non-church people in the common cause for peace and real democracy. St. Paul's Chapel, one of the few

unscathed buildings following the 9/11 attack, offered its space and likely the bulk of its volunteer and ministry staff time in the initial crisis and well beyond it.

Our next story takes place in downtown Winnipeg. Crescent Fort Rouge United was faced with a demanding request for hospitality from people they did not know. Offering hospitality to one group unleashed a new spirit in the congregation – a subsequent, potentially controversial request for hospitality was greeted with enthusiasm. In both of the following experiences in one congregation, hospitality was freely offered as an expression of faith. Like the stories above, there was no payback.

### ***Hospitality: One Welcome Paves the Way***

Our current age of iPods, satellite radio and cable television has the potential to expose us to new worlds, but also the larger likelihood of keeping us safely within our own comfort zones without hearing the music or attending to the stories of people who are different than us. The practice of hospitality transgresses our spiritual gated-communities and takes us into riskier relationships. Practicing hospitality for its own sake brings together people previously kept apart, as the experience of this Winnipeg congregation shows.

On a sweltering August day in 2006, the Executive of Crescent Fort Rouge United was faced with a difficult decision on a time-line of less than two hours. Would the church offer sanctuary to a Pakistani refugee family of eight whose last legal appeal to stay in Canada had been turned down? The family were to turn themselves in to government custody at 4:30 that afternoon and be deported the next morning. The parents were in a mixed marriage (Sunni/Shia Muslims) and faced sectarian violence in Pakistan. The six children ranged from thirteen to almost one year of age. Terrified of the huge responsibility, the congregation's Executive considered the possible fate of the children and made a motion to offer sanctuary to the family. It took eighteen long months for an agreement to be brokered with the government to allow the family to stay in Canada. The

congregation enjoyed the benefit of a renewed sense of mission, positive media and community support, and generous donations. But there were also significant challenges: power struggles amidst supporters, volunteer burn-out, the clash of culture and the clash of class, and a seemingly bottomless pit of need. As well as a gift of space offered by the church, it was also a generous gift of time, talent and endurance.

About a year later, while the Pakistani family was still living in the church, congregation member Bill Gillis brought a different request for hospitality to Crescent Fort Rouge United's Council. In his work for the denomination, Bill travelled by car throughout the province, and frequently picked up young hitch-hikers, many of whom were musicians. Car conversations between this soft-spoken, grey-haired minister and his tattooed, green-haired passengers revealed spiritual and political common ground – the issues occupying the United Church often were the same issues being raised in the hitch-hikers' music. At the musicians' invitation, Bill started attending house shows in Winnipeg's metal and punk community. In the strength of those relationships, vocalist-guitarist Jesse Hill asked Bill about the possibility of Crescent as a venue. Members of Jesse's band, Right Through, were all in high school, and finding affordable venues was a challenge. The co-ordinator of several summer concert series at the church, Bill now came to the Council asking for permission to host concerts for these young, experimental musicians.

The picture Bill painted for the Council was not one that would bring obvious benefit – the style of music would not appeal to many in the congregation, the musicians could not afford to pay any rent, there was no indication whether these concerts would attract large numbers or none at all, and it would be unlikely that the musicians or their audience members would come flocking to church on Sunday mornings as a result. But Bill also volunteered that he would take responsibility for these concerts, from show-time set up to after-show clean-up. The Council gave enthusiastic



approval. The spirit of hospitality evident in the refugee sanctuary ministry now expanded into a branch of the arts unfamiliar to most congregation members.

Bill's focus has been on providing an all-ages music venue (as opposed to bars) and to provide a place where emerging musicians can gain performance experience. Some 130 bands have played at Crescent, mostly in the sanctuary, sometimes in the church's Upper Hall, with a range of music spanning folk, indie, rock, punk and metal. The only complaints, says Bill, "have come by email from 'Christians' outside the congregation who attack us for doing this kind of thing and saying we're in cahoots with the devil. They would disagree with our church on other stances we take, too."

The shows are mostly small, not well-organized or well-promoted. What takes Bill to a place of spiritual amazement is the gratitude and wonder of the young adults toward the church for "allowing" these concerts to happen. One performer had grown up in the United Church in Calgary and served his congregation as the youth group leader. When he asked about doing a show in his own church, the board had turned him down. That brought to mind the story of Irish rock band U2, whose front man, Bono, is as much political activist as musician. Bono and some of U2's members were deeply involved in a charismatic Christian community thirty years ago in Dublin, when they, too, were young and emerging musicians. Leaders of their Christian community forced them out, telling them they would have to choose between their music and their faith. Perhaps the world would have been robbed of U2 had the leaders of that Dublin church repeated the disciples' words to the risen Jesus, "Stay with us." But what *could* have happened in that congregation? Perhaps had they practiced a risky hospitality, the congregation's spirituality may have shifted to take up mending the world in the ways that Bono has advocated. When hospitality is not practiced, what opportunities are lost.

## ***HOSPITALITY QUESTIONS:***

For small group conversation or personal reflection:

- In this chapter's opening story, the author received gifts of hospitality from someone very different from her. Who would you find it difficult to receive gifts of hospitality from ("unchurched" or other religion? Refugee? Street person? Mentally ill person? Extremely wealthy person? Other?) Does hospitality depend on equality?
- Read the Biblical stories of hospitality cited on page 19. Tell some stories about times your church has offered hospitality – to whom? Why? What changed for the church out of this experience? What changed for the persons on the receiving end of your hospitality? What Biblical image or story connects with your personal story of hospitality? What Biblical image or story connects with your church's story of hospitality?
- How do you feel about the idea that hospitality is a Christian practice, and should not be offered in the hopes of results (new members, more money, etc.)? How does your church offer this kind of hospitality? In your personal life, do you offer hospitality to those who cannot return it?
- Look at your congregation's calendar – what percentage of bookings are congregational (meetings, choir rehearsal, Fall Supper, etc.) and what percentage are community (A.A., Moms and Tots, community choirs, etc.)? What does the use of space in your building tell you about your church's sense of hospitality?

- In the stories of Crescent Fort Rouge United (refugee sanctuary and youth bands), how might one experience of hospitality have opened the door for another? What current practices of hospitality in your church might open the door for other expressions of hospitality?
- Can you recall a time when your church or you personally did not offer hospitality (like the Dublin church with U2). What were the risks that went into the decision not to offer hospitality? What was lost by refusing hospitality?

## **Piazza: Place of Meeting**

A wave of immigrants to 1950s Toronto provoked a curious culture clash, as police officers kept breaking up gangs of Italian men found hanging around on street corners. To the police, these gatherings constituted loitering or vagrancy. The newcomers had no intention of breaking any laws – they were simply following the customs of home, where people would gather outdoors in the local piazza.

### ***Piazza 101***

A piazza is a pedestrian-friendly public space found in Italy's large cities and small towns alike. Typically, a piazza will have the church on one side of the square, town hall on the other, often a fountain, and shops, cafes and homes make up the rest. Serving as the crossroad of the community, a piazza is the place where everything and everyone comes together, the place where children play, teens cavort and canoodle, elders swap gossip, and families meet for afternoon coffee or gelato. The piazza blurs private and public space, as restaurants set up tables and chairs outdoors in the public square. In Sienna, people are so loyal to their piazzas that church baptisms are often followed by a second ritual at the piazza fountain. Piazzas are places of meeting and mingling, places of community – and they are public space. To borrow an image from Celtic Christianity, piazzas are “thin places,” places of meeting the Holy in friend and in stranger.

Although our weather makes piazza difficult, Canadian piazza is possible. A few years ago, Winnipeg's Portage and Main was the site of then Mayor Glenn Murray's big party, the “Get Together Downtown.” Held over a long weekend, the Get Together boasted an amazing array of local and national talent, all offered free to the people of Winnipeg. Winnipeg's population came out in all its diversity: Aboriginal and newly arrived refugee, old money and panhandlers, babies and grannies with walkers, the mix in the audience was as rich as the mix of talent at these free concerts. A wonderful congregation formed when the intersection was closed to traffic and open to people.

Portage and Main was that day a piazza, a thin place, a place of meeting and a place that belonged to everyone.

Another way of thinking about piazza can be found on the Canadian five dollar bill: there is an image of children playing a pick-up game of pond hockey, and a quote from Roch Carrier's beloved story, *The Hockey Sweater*: "The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We had three places – the school, the church, and the skating rink – but our real life was on the skating rink." In Carrier's story, a small town rink functions as what sociologists call a third place, a place that is neither work nor home. The features of a third place include availability of affordable food and drink, access by easy walking distance, home to regulars but yet with an openness to new friends, and a welcoming atmosphere. These qualities are also the benchmarks of the Italian piazza.

### ***Church as Piazza***

Tracey Lind, the Dean of Cleveland's Trinity Cathedral, brought the image of the piazza to churches on this side of the Atlantic, and in so doing invites us to rethink church. Could church function as a piazza? As a third place? A weekday visitor to Trinity Cathedral can walk right in to the sanctuary – doors are unlocked, and in nice weather, propped open. Here is a downtown church sanctuary that is literally open to the community, offering its spaces as a third place, a space for quiet meditation, a space to walk its labyrinth, a space undisputedly *in* downtown and offering an oasis *from* downtown. Cleveland's Trinity welcomes some 3,000 people a year to events that are not obviously "church" – their storefront's fair trade Cafe Ah Roma and the 10,000 Villages shop, and within the church its art gallery, music and performing arts events.

### ***Piazza Theology***

Tracey Lind understands the importance of the church as a public place, a meeting place and a third place. She invites the church to embrace what she calls piazza theology. When she was a

candidate for the position of Dean at Trinity, the search committee asked applicants for a one-page vision statement. Tracey's vision offered this:

... the founder of the Ursuline order said that the first rule of her community was that its members should become *piazzas*. I would suggest that this rule also be one of the cornerstones of an urban cathedral. For what is a *piazza* if not a town square, a place of openness and inclusivity where all God's people are invited to gather – to meet and greet, celebrate and grieve, protest, rest, recreate, learn and trade the cultural and religious wealth of the nations. A *piazza* is a place of welcome and hospitality; of energy and diversity; of public debate and discourse; of learning and service; and that, I believe, is the God-given mission and vocation of an urban cathedral.

She got the job. Embracing her vision, this downtown cathedral had a make-over in 2002, and now has a Commons. As well as the cafe and 10,000 Villages shop, this new piazza offers the community welcome in a public garden space with outdoor seating, an indoor piazza with seating and fountains, and meeting space for community groups and church groups alike. The cathedral itself has a labyrinth, a noon-hour concert program, and an open-door policy.

### ***Drawing on St Angela***

Over steaming coffee on a drizzly day, Tracey Lind told me the legend of St Angela. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Angela de Merici was working in her parents' olive grove when she had a vision. Angela felt called to form a religious company of women, but they were not to be cloistered; rather, they were to exercise their ministry in the community. Angela urged her sisters to claim the spirit of piazza as a way of meeting Christ at the crossroads. Claiming the spirit of the piazza is claiming a spirit that is open, hospitable, and perhaps a bit chaotic at times. It's full of surprise; it's full of welcome, collaboration, cooperation and is the place of community. When Angela urged her sisters

to “be a piazza”, she urged them to live at the crossroads, the meeting place, the commons – the place where we see Christ in humanity, in one another, in public – as opposed to finding Christ within the walls of a cloister, a gated community.

### ***A Meeting Place***

In most Italian piazzas there is a fountain or a well. People tend to gather where there is water, and this is especially true for our Biblical ancestors in the faith, desert people all. In the story of the exile of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:19), and the story of the exodus (Num. 21: 16-17), the water of a well is a gift from God, ensuring survival. The well is also a meeting place, the place where Isaac and Moses met their spouses, Rebecca and Zipporah (Gen 24; Ex 2). In the Moses story, our hero defends the well, defeating privatization and ensuring that the shepherd women (those at the bottom of the social heap) are allowed access to the water of life. The prophet Isaiah urges us to a time when with joy, we will draw water from the wells of salvation (Is 12:3). In the Song of Solomon (4:15), a lover is praised for being “a garden fountain, a well of living water”. It is at Jacob’s well in Samaria where a woman profoundly challenges Jesus on matters of inclusivity – the setting of this story is no accident (John 4). The well is a public place, a meeting place, a place that is open to all people, a place where one may be changed by others. In the English language, the word *well* is also a synonym for *health*. The presence of a piazza or some kind of public space ensures the health, the well-being, the symbolic water of life of the community.

### ***A Prairie Piazza***

In the heart of Winnipeg, Crescent Fort Rouge United Church is evolving into a piazza. The grounds contain the Agnes Saunders Memory Garden, where church and community members can inter the cremains of family and friends. The garden, maintained by church volunteers, has several benches and is a pleasant oasis in Winnipeg’s most densely populated neighbourhood. One local

resident, a World War II veteran, receives the ministry of nature in the garden as he remembers his lost Navy buddy whose memorial plaque graces the sanctuary.

A few years ago, Crescent's worshippers arrived at church to find the startling words "Most metal church evar!" chalked on the front steps. Bill Gillis, a member of the congregation, offers the congregation's hospitality to a variety of young Winnipeg bands seeking a place to make their music. At a recent show, one artist told me she loves the beauty of the space and feels a sense of joy there. Many of these musicians have never been inside a church before, and are astounded ("blown away") by the space and the fact they are welcomed to perform there. Some, who are active members of other churches, have told Bill "My church would *never* accept my music and let me play there." They are not flocking to the pews on Sunday morning, but their preconceived ideas of church are shaken and changing: "most metal church evar!"

A less-edgy summer concert series offers local musicians, the congregation and the neighbourhood opportunities of joyful encounter. Audiences are small, a mix of congregation members and community members. Each of these concert ministries – the edgy youth and the more traditional – is deeply appreciated. While these events bring in some money, that is not their primary purpose. What they bring in barely covers the costs *and* they are a key part of both Crescent's mission – gift to and engagement with the wider community – and Crescent's congregational identity.

Crescent Fort Rouge United's program, *Intersections: Life, Art & Spiritualities*, brings artists to the congregation and community by inviting provocative plays from the Fringe Festival circuit, followed by a panel discussion and audience dialogue. *Intersections* audiences are a mix of church, neighbourhood and theatre folks, a creative mingling.

The *Intersections* ministry offers the piazza's sense of meeting. The program from a recent re-mounting of the Fringe play, *Padre X*, describes this mission: "*Intersections* is a Crescent Fort Rouge



United Church program, open to the wider community, in which we want to use the arts (primarily drama, but also music and other art forms) and spiritualities to engage questions and issues in contemporary living. We want to sharpen awareness of the connections between faith/spirituality and everyday life.” The presentation of Marc Moir’s *Padre X*, the story of the only Canadian chaplain to be awarded the Victoria Cross during the Second World War, was followed by a panel, moderated by a coordinator of spiritual care. The panellists consisted of the author/actor, a current military chaplain, and two who had been conscientious objectors during World War II. The discussion was lively and challenging, particularly when it opened to the comments from the audience. With little to no budget, *Intersections* offers the opportunity for artists to (re)stage their work and engage in critical dialogue with an audience. Admission fees are reasonable (usually \$10), balancing the need to pay the artist with the need of keeping the event affordably inclusive. The church usually makes a little money off these efforts, the artists more – but the mission is more about piazza, offering a space for conversations that matter among people who otherwise don’t bump into each other (the military chaplain and the conscientious objectors, for example).

### ***Contested Space***

Bumping into each other can sometimes hurt, leading piazza space to be contested space. Even space we assume serves as our version of a piazza is disappearing. In Toronto in 1997, some anti-tobacco activists were forcibly removed from du Maurier Downtown Jazz Festival. The Festival was taking place in the city’s piazza – Nathan Phillips Square, just in front of Toronto City Hall. The protesters believed this event was happening in public space. What they didn’t know was that during the du Maurier Downtown Jazz Festival, Nathan Phillips Square became the property of the tobacco sponsor. Public space no more.

Such public meeting spaces seem to be disappearing in Canada. The first time i explored the city of Winnipeg, the autumn sun was delicious on my face, and my stomach fluttered happily when

i realized i was walking towards Canada’s legendary windiest intersection, Portage and Main. A concrete barrier blocked my approach, so i followed its curve, only to find myself a block removed from the intersection. Short of jumping the barricades and breaking the jaywalking law, there is no way for a pedestrian to cross Portage and Main at street level. Once Western Canada’s banking hub, once the rallying point of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, now the iconic intersection is zoomed through by vehicles on their way somewhere else. A city agreement with private developers in 1976 included a commitment to close the intersection to pedestrians for fifty years. What was once a public space, an intersection where people of all walks of life could meet, has now gone underground to a mall where loitering is discouraged and security guards are on patrol. The public meeting place has become a private commercial space. Might our churches open their doors to invite people to once again bump into each other, to be a meeting place?

### ***Contested Art***

Canadian author Gabrielle Roy asked, “Could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?” Getting to know each other is always risky business – stories of the clashes between artist and patron abound. A legendary example of the private patron vs. artist conflict took place in the early 1930s in New York City. The internationally renowned artist Diego Rivera was commissioned to create a mural in Nelson Rockefeller’s new skyscraper. The 63 foot long mural, “Man at the Crossroads”, was to explore the intersections of industry, science, and economics. When Rivera put Lenin in the picture, controversy arose, negotiations between the artist and the patron broke down, and on February 10, 1934, Rockefeller Centre workmen demolished the mural with axes.

A more recent occurrence of such an uproar unfolded in Winnipeg over a piece of public art to celebrate Louis Riel. Unveiled on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature in 1971, the sculpture depicted a naked, tortured, very human man, dramatically capturing the tensions that defined Louis

Riel's life and mission. Art opens the door to dialogue, but often exposes controversy: did this statue of Riel show a hero or a victim? Did the sculpture speak to the colonized past of the Métis people or was it suggesting that today's Métis are similarly victims? After much uproar, the original statue was moved to the grounds of the College Universitaire de St. Boniface in 1995. A safer, more traditional statue confirming Riel as a statesman was erected on the grounds of the Legislature in 1996.

### ***Churches and art: order and mess***

Although the church has the reputation of censor, Tracey Lind insists that it was cathedrals that kept art alive during the Dark Ages. Literacy was kept alive in the church's monastic communities. Visual art was kept alive in iconography, stained glass and wood carvings, as a way of telling the stories of faith. Bach, she points out, was a church musician, hired to write music for Sunday worship. The cathedral's 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge, she says, is to take what was an 11<sup>th</sup> century institution that was at the heart of the community and make it relevant to today's community. Embracing the image of church as piazza is one way to achieve that goal.

Yet stories abound where the church's role with arts has not been helpful. Quebec filmmaker Denys Arcand's 1989 movie, *Jesus of Montreal*, takes a sharp look at this. Father Leclerc hires a young actor, Daniel, to jazz up his tired Passion play script, and gets more than he bargained for. Daniel explores the latest archaeological finds and newest Biblical interpretations, and stages a passion play with scalding social criticism. Father Leclerc objects that church-goers don't want to hear Daniel's version of this story; they come seeking consolation and happiness. He orders the actors to return to his original script, the actors defy him, and the show is shut down by the police. Given the history of the church as patron and protector of the arts, why do stories like *Jesus of Montreal* continue to unfold? The tension, contends Tracey Lind, is that the arts are messy and churches like order.

### ***Two Congregations Struggle***

The members of St George and St Andrew United in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia experienced this tension in the spring of 2011. St George and St Andrew United Church is a designated heritage building, and one of the first united churches in Canada (their union of Methodist St George and Presbyterian St Andrews happened in 1911). Their talented organist, Deirdre Morrell, runs several other choirs, including a community choir called Annapolis Voices. This choir has some overlap with the congregation: several of the choir's members are also congregation members, and the choir rehearses and performs at the church. At a recent spring concert of Annapolis Voices, a visual component was added to the experience. During the eighty minute performance of Maurice Durufle's *Requiem*, artist Wayne Boucher created a large, modern piece (also called *Requiem*), some two meters tall. Deirdre felt this visual work would contribute that same added dimension for the congregation's Lenten and Easter worship. And so, the visual *Requiem* was offered to the church, and the board agreed to hang it for a period of time. But some in the congregation raised objections. The simplicity of this 100 year old church's interior was disrupted by a modern piece of visual art. Although *Requiem's* colour palette goes well with the stained glass windows, some found its modern sensibilities clashing with century-old architectural style. The sense of order was messed with by a piece of modernistic art.

Sydenham Street United in Kingston, Ontario, faces a similar conundrum. A historic landmark church, the beautiful sanctuary is a popular performance space for choral music, and, increasingly, other performing arts. In the sanctuary, hang four flags: the Union Jack, the Canadian flag, the United Church flag and the Rainbow flag. All of these flags are removed for performances and then put back up again, a considerable amount of work. The Worship Committee decided to take down all the flags except for special liturgical celebrations such as Remembrance Day and Canada Day. This decision was reported to the Council, and there was received with no comment. Some weeks later, a sporadic attendee came to church and complained about the missing flags. In

the ensuing conversations, fears surfaced that “other people are taking over” and that there are “all these changes for *those* people [renters/artists] – soon there will be nothing left.” The public face of Sydenham Street United is one that is welcoming and open to the arts. But Sydenham’s minister, Elizabeth MacDonald notes, “There is a bruised part of our congregation, where people are feeling tender and sore.”

### ***Churches: Giving Space to Artists Speaks Hope***

One bruising era was surely the Great Depression when half of Canada’s workforce was on some form of “relief.” In the U.S.A.’s Dirty Thirties, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s government took on a creative role that the church of the Middle Ages had - that of patron of the arts. Roosevelt’s WPA (Works Progress Administration) put millions of people back to work on projects that would serve the public good. WPA’s Project One was the arts division, which during its hay day, gave meaningful work to a staggering number of artists. The Federal Art Project put 5,300 visual artists and related professionals to work on public murals, documentary photography, paintings, stained glass, and teaching others to be artists (employees included Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange). The Federal Music Project hired on 16,000 musicians – orchestras, chamber music, dance bands, musical instructors and the pioneers of music therapy. The Federal Theatre Project had 12,700 theatrical workers in its employ, boasting 1,000 performances per month before nearly one million people across the land, many of whom were seeing live theatre for the first time (employees included Orson Welles, Burt Lancaster, Joseph Cotton). And the Federal Writers Project took on 6,686 writers who produced some 800 titles – state guide books, oral history collections (Slave narratives) and folklore (employees included Ralph Ellison, Studs Terkel, John Cheever and Zora Neale Hurston). In a time of dust bowls, hunger and privation, the WPA arts projects created hope, unity and a sense of common purpose through public art. Could churches, embracing the image of piazza, offer their space to artists seeking to re-energize and forge new

images of common purpose? Churches may not have the cash to put artists to work. Many churches are cash poor, but at the same time real estate rich. Hospitable space is the gift we can offer our communities. This would be a way for the church to speak hope to our communities.

### ***PIAZZA QUESTIONS:***

For small group conversation or personal reflection:

- Looking at the features and definitions of piazza, in what ways is your church a piazza? How does your church function as a piazza for the congregation? How does your church function as a piazza for members of the wider community?
- What are some of your community's piazza-type events, like Winnipeg's "Get Together Downtown" where people in all their diversity meet? How can your church offer these piazza or thin place opportunities to the wider community?
- Tracey Lind notes that conflict and tensions arise when the church offers hospitality to the arts because the arts are messy and churches like order. Is there a story in your own church where art caused a conflict or tension (*Jesus of Montreal*, the visual art at St George and St Andrew, the flag issue at Sydenham Street)? How might the stories cited in this chapter be resolved? How might your own church deal with its need for order and the "messy" arts?
- Churches are in the business of hope. How does your church's art offer you hope? How does your church's art offer hope to your community?

## Refinery

A once sleepy neighbourhood church now demands notice with its a bold and attractive sign bearing the emblem of a tree beginning to leaf and the words, “St James Anglican Church – The Refinery – Arts and Spirit Centre”. Attractive banners on the adjoining parish hall proclaim “The Refinery: Theatre, Music, Dance...and social justice”. The signs bear witness to the ministry of St James to the arts community of Saskatoon, and to the art-lovers who are finding their way to a new venue. The church is often defined as “God’s house.” At St James, as well as a building that is God’s house, the freestanding Refinery offers a home to the arts.

### *Dedicated Space:*

#### *A space or spaces designed and equipped for a specific purpose*

Located in Saskatoon’s Nutana neighbourhood, St James Anglican Church sits between the university and the arts community, a prime spot for an arts center. Housed in the former parish hall, the Refinery space was once what one might expect in any parish hall or church basement. The lower level held a church kitchen, and partitioned Sunday school rooms. The upper level, a large open space, was rented out to a Ukrainian dance studio for some twenty-five years. Then the dance studio served notice. Meanwhile, local musical firebrand Angie Tysseland was commissioned to write a cantata celebrating St James’ 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary on the theme of fire – St James has burnt down a couple of times. Tysseland’s cantata needed more voices than the church choir had at the time, so the Refiner’s Choir was born, a church and community choir that went on to have several years of performing and touring. St James member Bev Orr recalls it this way:

I don’t remember what year we started the Refinery. This building had been rented to a Ukrainian dance school for 25, 28 years, and so no one from the parish had anything to do with this building, it was just a clear rental. And the idea came for us to take over the space



again, and turn it into an arts centre. Angie was really the driving creative force behind that, as well as several vestry people. Renovations began, and the first year classes were yoga, tai chi and Angie had a meditative chant class – there was a whole lot of variety. *The whole idea was to open the space to the community [my emphasis].*

The variety shows a wide community has embraced the space. The Refinery's Winter 2011 classes include creative dance for children, *fundamentals of acting*, mosaics of your personal mythology, tai chi, workshops utilizing theatre of the oppressed techniques, Indian cooking, mindful meditation, belly dancing and chocolate-making. Live performances in the same period list a concert by Valdy, and the plays *The Occupation of Heather Rose*, *Filling Holes*, and *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress*.

Clear from the outset was the value that the Refinery was not a For Profit endeavour, but that it be self-sufficient. So far it has been, although sometimes St James makes good the debt at the end of the year. Even more clear is the value that the Refinery belongs to the community.

### ***Go Wide, Not Deep:***

#### ***Ensure a wide variety of programming by renting to entry-level and beginning instructors***

The classes offered at the Refinery have an artistic or spiritual base, but also provide an entry level for new instructors, thus nurturing teachers as well as students. In order to keep offering a wide variety, the Refinery has said no to requests from some teachers wishing to expand their programming to multiple evenings – that is the time for those teachers to branch out into a different space; that is the time to move on. This means fighting the instinct for stability, the temptation to go with the yoga teacher who wants to book three evenings a week. But giving in to that temptation would scuttle the Refinery's programming. Further, should the yoga teacher subsequently decide to open his own studio after five years while other potential renters have been turned away, rebuilding a base would be extremely difficult. The Refinery's variety of classes is a key to its success.

### ***Local Talent:***

#### ***Seek out local performers in need of an affordable venue***

Live Five, founded in 2004, consists of five independent theatre companies in Saskatoon, each producing their own productions, but joined together to promote and offer their shows in one theatre season. “So what can you expect this year?” asked their website. “How about a tropical and brave drama about the effects of violence on the individual and beyond, the world premiere of a dark comedy from two Saskatchewan playwrights, a one-woman tour-de-force, a witty script by the writer of the Oscar winning film, *American Beauty*, and, back by popular demand, a puppet burlesque show!...We’re also pleased to announce that this season, all of our shows will be back at the Refinery Arts and Spirit Centre, the cosiest place in Saskatoon to enjoy a performance, and maybe a chat and a drink afterwards.”

St James member Bev Orr spoke enthusiastically of the Refinery hosting small productions by local companies who need affordable space. At times, she says, the plays “haven’t been very churchy. We’ve been a Fringe venue and Fringe plays can get quite provocative, and there was some press about that happening in a church. But over the years, we’ve come to a sense of peace about the artistic endeavour, knowing that there’s a message – there’s always a message in theatre.”

### ***Market appropriately:***

#### ***Ensure the right audience is coming to the right event***

Refinery’s administrator, Cynthia Dyck, notes that a store or a restaurant has just one demographic, but the Refinery is a mixed bag. “I don’t want the nice nuclear family with an eight-year-old and a ten-year-old to end up at the sketch comedy, because it won’t fit, and they won’t like it. And I don’t want the edgy young people to wind up at the musical comedy fluff because they’re just going to be bored. It’s been a bit of a challenge getting the word out to the community about

what we are. We don't just have one product or one demographic." St James' rector Dianne Mesh says, "We can deal, most of us, if the language isn't clean. It's very healthy, having this window on the world around us, that close up. We've chosen to have a close up because we have to deal with it, as opposed to trying to keep ourselves separate from it. We've chosen to invite it right in."

***Arts Administrator, not Church Secretary:***

***Hire a person with background and connections to the arts community***

A community member of the Refiners Choir and friend of Tysseland, Cynthia Dyck was looking for some office space in her new calling as an arts administrator. The Refinery offered her free space in return for answering the phone and doing some administrative work. Bev Orr says, "The Vestry quickly realized: you know, we should be paying this woman because she's so valuable to the organization."

As a board member of Saskatoon's 25<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre, Cynthia was deeply connected to the arts community. She knew that 25<sup>th</sup> Street was looking for performance space, as was the French language Troupe de Jour. As well, Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan was looking for space for winter programming. Cynthia began brokering, getting those players to the table, and out of that came a partnership between 25<sup>th</sup> Street, Troupe and the Refinery. Resources were pooled: 25<sup>th</sup> Street brought in their lights and technical equipment and audience chairs, Troupe also contributed technical equipment, the Refinery had the building and made risers for the audience. Cynthia describes it as "a pot-luck – everybody brought something and then we had a space we could use. Originally, when I came on, what we all imagined my job would be was networking, going out into the community saying, "This is what is happening, do you want to use the space?" Never happened. I was too busy answering the phone here. This is a small town, word got out and there was a real need for small, affordable space."

Churches wishing to offer hospitality to the arts would do well to hire an arts administrator, as St James did with Cynthia Dyck. Cynthia says, “I think that’s very difficult for churches to do that only from within. The church has to grab some stakeholders from outside and use them as kind of their pins. I had the credibility and connections to bring people in. It brought down some of the defences because I wasn’t in the church or from the church. Somebody comes in and says, ‘Do you go to the church?’ No, I don’t. ‘Oh! Okay!’ – and the attitude changes because they’re not worried about being preached to. This building is for everyone. And my being here lent credibility to that, because the arts community would go, oh, it is for everyone or you wouldn’t be working here. It was interesting how quickly the defences and suspicions went down.”

### ***Hospitable Spaces:***

#### ***Design and decorate for the purpose***

The Refinery’s entry is at ground level. Upstairs now is a black-box style theatre with a seating capacity of 120. On the lower level, is a Box Office for Refinery events, staffed part-time by the church secretary and able to receive credit card payments. A meditation room is cosily carpeted and able to hold a small group. A pleasant reception room that often doubles as an art gallery is spacious and warm. Off the reception room, a full kitchen. During its prime season, the Refinery averages 600 visitors weekly. Not bad in a city of some 200,000.

The design of the reception area was given careful attention by Cynthia, and has a distinct personality of its own. A large, yet intimate room, a rental group entering the space for the first time remarked, “Wow! It doesn’t look anything like a church basement!” Attention was paid to creating a deliberately welcoming environment. Cynthia’s secret? “Couches! Soft furniture – no stacking chairs. We’re in a wooden building built in the 1920s, so it’s got character, it’s got a nice feel to it. We stayed away from institutional colours. We made the decision to go with these chrome 1950s style kitchen sets, and that was really smart. It doesn’t feel formal; it’s not stacking chairs, stacking tables.

It looks like somebody's kitchen, and that totally changed the way people feel in this room. And lighting – there are no florescent lights down here. Fluorescents make people feel like they're sitting in a doctor's office – they do not make people feel like sitting and relaxing. When I've tried to move some renters on to other places, I've realized how important this welcoming space is.” The small lamps on each of the kitchen tables cast a warm glow, welcoming deep conversations around the table. The couches were snapped up when a hotel was selling off some gently used furniture. Unlike most church basements, everything matches and the colour palette is warm and soothing. It is a room you want to spend time in. The galley kitchen serves as the concession stand for live shows and art shows, offering up coffee, beer and wine. A couple of cafe stools by the concession counter and at some other strategic places offer opportunities for conversation and reflection.

While in a separate building from the church, the Refinery's decor has been chosen with the same care with which we furnish the sacred spaces of our sanctuaries. Unlike the infamously protected “Ladies' Parlours” of old, this space is clearly designed to offer a welcome to the public. The care taken with the space with its eclectic mix of fine and funky conveys an atmosphere of hospitality, as if invited into a friend's living room. Although furnished with a wary eye on finances, there is no sense of mismatched cast-offs. The used couches do not at all look second-hand. Clearly, in creating a space to experience and reflect on art, hospitality has been a guiding principle.

### ***Wise Fees:***

#### ***One size doesn't fit all***

The rental fee scale slides, varying by the kind of space required (performance, meeting, classroom), the type of activity, whether there is an admission charge, the size of the group (10 people are less work than 80), non-profit or for-profit, and whether this is a one-off or to be a regular group (an 8-week class, say). The fees range between \$50 to \$300.

## *Encounters, Not Silos:*

### *Find openings for encounters that get the relationships right*

Martin Luther King used to quip that eleven o'clock Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. Though many church signs proclaim "All are welcome", our congregations still struggle to be more inclusive and less homogenous. A perhaps unanticipated strength of the Refinery is something that gives Cynthia great joy – in her words, those who use the Refinery "can't silo." They cannot remain untouched by each other when sharing space, but have to deal with each other in all their diversity. She says, "The yoga students have to deal with the theatre people upstairs. The 12-Step Program has to get directions from the weird gay guy up there. So they're always forced to deal – they can't silo. If they want to work here, they can't silo. Even if it's just sharing the same doorway, it's amazing how we're changed by sharing space. We're going, 'Hey! This is important! Look at those two people having to work things out, and they normally wouldn't run into each other.' Relationships are the most important. If you get relationships right, then everything else falls into place.

Bev Orr confirms this with a different story. A retired minister of a very conservative denomination took on a job auditing some city employees. In this new context, no one knew of the retiree's past and so no one treated him as The Pastor or The Minister. The awakening for the retiree was how isolated he had been all those years in the church. Rather than mourning the loss of his place of privilege, he is embracing this new setting, exclaiming, "I can't believe how big my God is getting. And I can't believe how big my God is going to be." Bev said, "It just sent chills down me, because here's this guy from this very narrow place, and he's doing this..." Her fist unclenched to an open palm. "This is what we're doing at the Refinery. For everybody that comes, whether a congregation member or a community member, it just makes their god get bigger, or their world view open up."

***Keep the Gifts Separate:***

***Be clear about separate gifts: the church offers the gift of space and the artists independently offer their own gift of content***

In contemporary Western culture, there is a suspicion of Christianity, and in the arts community, a well-grounded fear of censorship. Cynthia Dyck, the Refinery's administrator, draws a clear line between the church sponsoring programs as opposed to the church providing space in the Refinery for others to provide programs. "People would phone and say, 'I hear such-and-such is going on at your church' and we would say, 'No, it's not in the church, it's not church programming.' This is not St James programming, but community programming and St James is supporting it being here. I use the image of a library – the library isn't responsible for what's in the books, but their job is to have the books available.....the mandate is art that instigates thought, that nurtures expression or deepens reflection on the life experience. So we don't shy away from things that challenge church or challenge the life experience – if it's dirty and swearing, that's fine – if it's life affirming in some way, and pushing people to understand themselves or their life more deeply."

***Keep the conversation alive:***

***In the congregation, keep talking about hospitality to the arts, your gift of space to artists and to community, and why it is part of your ministry***

Rector Dianne Mesh reflected that, for the longest time, St James dealt with the wider culture's suspicion of the church by backing off the Refinery, not letting the community see that this actually is the church's program. The result, she believes, is that lots of those who visit the Refinery don't know of its connection to the church. A small group of St James members is now trying to articulate a vision statement. This is proving a challenge. "What could we say in a program note? 'Yes, this really is a church.'" After a thoughtful pause, she adds, "And we want nothing except for us to work together for the good of our community and for the arts in our city."

Bev Orr's involvement here pre-dates the Refinery. Attracted by the sense of openness and welcome she found at St James, she sees the Refinery as an extension of that openness and welcome. "We have space, and in my opinion it's important that the space be used. It just seems a waste that there are so many church buildings that are only used Sunday morning, with only a few people coming and going through the week, but exclusive groups, right? So opening the building to people who aren't necessarily looking for church – that's really important to me, that we open the space to the community. The Refinery is not an evangelical tool in the sense of recruiting new people. That's not what it's about. But there are a lot of people who just come into this building and feel something. It really is a spiritual place...and maybe that's enough."

Rector Dianne Mesh came to St James in 2008, about seven years after the Refinery came into being. The Refinery was a deep part of her sense of call here. "It's in the creative place that I get closest to understanding God, as opposed to in the theological head-space. I've always been attracted to people who commit their lives to the arts. A few become very successful financially, and it's a good deal, a sweet deal. But most sacrifice a lot and live on the edge for the sake of following their artistic call. And I just have tremendous respect for those people. They hold up the beauty of the world, and often point out the injustice of the world. It delights my soul."



### ***Refinery Questions:***

For small group conversation or personal reflection:

- The Refinery is arm's length from the church, which affords artistic freedom. Cynthia Dyck uses the image of a library – the library (church) isn't responsible for the content of the books (arts), but the job is to have the books (arts) available. How do you see your church's role with the arts, and specifically, how would your church grapple with edgy content in art?
- The Refinery is a place where people “can't silo,” but have to deal with one another across their differences. What could your congregation offer in dealing with differences? How might a congregation learn from the Refinery about not silo-ing? In its programming, the Refinery seeks a broad diversity, describing itself as having a no one demographic or being a mixed bag. Again, how might your church learn from this hospitable value of the Refinery – or might your church offer some suggestions to broaden the Refinery's appeal?
- St James' rector, Dianne Mesh, says “It's in the creative place that i get closest to understanding God.” Yet the Refinery is arm's length from the church and described as the church's gift of space to the community. How might you bring the Refinery's arts into conversation with the congregation as the congregation seeks to get closer to understanding God?

## Old Stone Presbyterian

Could there be a better address for any urban church than 91 Public Square? Cleveland, Ohio's Old Stone Church (First Presbyterian) is a downtown landmark in the city on the shore of Lake Erie. Public Square, in its own right a piazza, is in the heart of the downtown. The square holds the city's public transit terminal, topped by a huge mall and movie house, the city's three tallest skyscrapers, the warehouse district, and is in easy walking distance to restaurant row and the Cleveland Browns Stadium. Exiting the Terminal to catch a streetcar or taxi, you can see majestic Old Stone Church across the square. During rush hour, the neighbourhood hums with foot traffic, as suburbanites make their way to the surrounding office towers and government buildings. The park in the middle of the square is vibrant with street people, skateboarders, busking musicians, and even someone who wants a shave can find a working outlet to plug in an electric razor.

### *Sick City:*

#### *Respond to your context*

When Old Stone's current ministry staff arrived two years ago, Euclid (Cleveland's main street) was under reconstruction as old trolley tracks were dug up. The project took so long that many businesses relocated in frustration, decimating the area and leaving blocks of empty storefronts. Cleveland as a city is struggling. In the year 2000, it boasted a population of almost half a million souls. The current economic crisis has seen a monstrous population exodus.

Beth Giuliano is Old Stone's Director of Arts & Community Development; her spouse, Mark Giuliano is the Senior Pastor. Beth noted the challenges of the downtown core. Even in the midst of large, downtown hotels, the streets after dark are eerily quiet, with an absence of both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Shops are closed, or their darkened windows hold "For Sale or Rent" signs. The street has just had a great restoration and make-over, including the installation of a wonderful transit corridor, but the absent urban vitality life denotes an air of defeat and urban decay.

## *Revitalizing the City:*

### *Seek and build on signs of hope*

But signs of hope abound in this city. Further along Euclid Avenue, the Wyndham Hotel has been redeveloped, capitalizing on the redevelopment of Playhouse Square. Boasting five theatres, Playhouse Square is the USA's second largest theatre complex (New York's Lincoln Centre takes top prize). Nearby, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is a destination for tourists of a certain age from all over the world. The address One Playhouse Square once held the radio station where radio disc jockey Allan Freed coined the term "rock and roll." A free green Trolley loops the downtown core, including the Terminal as one of its stops. Further out Euclid, a short streetcar ride away, is University Circle, home of Case Western Reserve University, the major hospitals, the Cleveland Institute of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art. The Cleveland Symphony is one of the nation's top five.

In choosing to live in a downtown condo instead of the suburbs, Beth and Mark incarnate hope for the faithful revitalization of Cleveland's Public Square. Still, it is a challenge. A downtown scavenger hunt for the staff Christmas party was met with some resistance. Paths may cross in the Public Square, but people walk with their eyes down on their way to a corporate tower while homeless others are plugging in their razors for a morning shave. Their hope is that Old Stone can serve as a place of meeting, a place where conversations across those huge chasms can begin. Beth explains, "Before we came here, we were in downtown Savannah, probably one of the friendliest places on earth, and we got here, and people don't make eye contact. People are nervous when you speak to them. One of the first goals was to smile." To break down the fear suburban congregants harbour about the downtown neighbourhood, Beth and Mark have initiated dining out nights, choosing a downtown restaurant and inviting whoever would like to join them.

### ***Revitalizing the Church's Presence:***

#### ***Let the neighbourhood know this church is alive and active***

Old Stone participates actively in the revitalization of the downtown. Exploiting their prime location, Old Stone communicates its existence and its mission well to all that foot traffic.

Permanent banners on the church proclaim the mission *help, hope, home*, and sandwich boards placed on the sidewalk announce “Sanctuary Open Doors, 12-1, Monday through Friday, Sanctuary Access 9-4, Ontario Street Entrance”. On my visit, a congregational volunteer was on hand for the noon to one time slot, welcoming visitors and inviting them to look around and to ask any questions they might have. A couple of men on a break from jury duty came in, as did some women tourists. A sandwich board at the Ontario Street entrance offered the information that on Tuesdays and Thursdays, a lunch hour Yoga class is available. A brochure offers free valet parking for church events, and tickets from a particular parking lot can be validated by an usher. Another sandwich board welcomes people to the Gallery at Old Stone (open Mon-Fri, 9-4, and boasting a WIFI hotspot). All the boards list the church’s website.

The first order of ministry business for Beth and her spouse, Mark, was to make sure people know the doors of Old Stone are open. Their first year at Old Stone, people would say to them, “You work where? I thought that was a museum.” Now, the schedule is a demanding 24/7. Beth sees the church’s mission as “being a light on the Square, making sure that faith is not absent on the square amongst all the other stuff that is going on, whether it’s the urban campers or the bank people or whoever else is down there.”

#### ***...and let audiences know that this is a church***

An old sanctuary often boasts grand acoustics, and many a downtown church becomes a venue for choral groups, recitals and other musical performances. “I do not want to be one of those churches that just rent out their space, rent out their sanctuary without welcoming people to this space,

without saying ‘Welcome to my house; welcome to God’s house.’ This is about building relationships,” says Beth. At these renter events, someone from the church offers words of welcome not only for a performance, but also an invitation to return Sunday morning, complete with parking information. Concise yet warm, the audience is made aware that this is a church, that they are welcome, and that there is a link between the Saturday night concert and the Sunday morning worship. The message is communicated that Old Stone is alive and active. This is not just, “yeah, we need the money so we’re renting our space. I don’t want to put God on the back burner.”

The spill-over is not about numbers, but rather about significant conversations, faith dialogues with those who may never darken the doors again, but nonetheless are in need of a deep conversation in a hospitable environment.

### ***Revitalizing Through Art:***

#### ***Create a clear mission statement***

The Gallery is the brain child of Old Stone’s Arts and Community Development Minister, Beth Giuliano. The church had done a strong job on their mission and vision statements, so when a member donated a substantial sum in memory of her spouse, the idea of creating a gallery space was affirmed. The mandate is “The gallery has a strong vision to exhibit local, regional and national artists whose art speaks to the downtown core and its vitality. The gallery seeks artists who strive to be an active part in the dialogue towards the city’s faithful revitalization.”

Faithful revitalization, says Beth, means being a bit gritty. When local artists call seeking space, they are given a copy of the mandate and asked how their work might address the faithful revitalization of the city. There may be a place for *Precious Moments* style art, but it is not in Old Stone’s Gallery. As a postcard promoting the Gallery claims, “The arts can awaken within us a

deeper sense of ourselves. Interacting with art can provide a unique opportunity to reveal a new truth, to contemplate a new vision; not just for today, but for tomorrow as well.”

### ***Make the space hospitable and beautiful***

In its past life, the space now occupied by the Gallery was a no-go zone, cordoned off by a red velvet rope, with old panelling that made it look, says Beth, like a funeral home. With the generous gift of \$96,000, the space has been transformed: natural light abounds, the dark panelling has been removed and walls are painted a light but warm colour. There are soft, comfortable chairs, a substantial wooden table for times the room is used for meetings, and a kitchenette with serving counter facilitates reception food and drink. The Gallery is adjacent to the church’s administrative office, so security is not a concern. That means the Gallery is also on the main route into the building, and those who come for an A.A. meeting, a Yoga class, or a concert are likely to take advantage of the Gallery’s offerings. A Gallery that is accessible to all is a strong value for Beth, who, with a committee of the church, acts as its curator. Old Stone is on the city’s gallery hop map, as well as on the (free) Trolley stop.

### ***Open with strength:***

#### ***An artist from within the congregation paves the way for something new***

Mary Lou Ferbert is a member of Old Stone. A large scale water colour artist, Ferber’s work has hung in company with that of Georgia O’Keefe, and she has had a solo show in Japan. After a time of bereavement and withdrawal, her Gallery show *Wild Urban* was Ferbert’s re-entry into the congregation. Ferbert’s work about the urban scape and interaction with nature proved a strong beginning for the Gallery, both in terms of draw within and beyond the congregation, and in embracing the mandate.

**[sidebar:** After years of painting I have come to realize that I subliminally draw my subjects from the commonplace. I find beauty in the every day. A sewer grate, milkweed, eggs, a bunch of beets, ocean flotsam, brick paving, goldenrod, a fireplug—all speak to me. I want to pull people into my paintings, make them feel my passion, help them to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. – artist’s statement, [www.marylouferbert.com](http://www.marylouferbert.com) (Feb 2, 2011).]

### ***Edgy connections:***

#### ***Link the art in the gallery to the experience of the congregation***

A recent exhibit on display at the Gallery was *Through Students’ Eyes*<sup>1</sup>, an edgy show of high school students’ photography and text in response to three questions: what is the purpose of school? What are the things that help you succeed in school? What are the things that impede your success in school? The student artists were from Cleveland, Savannah (Georgia) and Sierra Leone. Accompanying a photo of a seated accordion player wearing some sort of *Star Wars* mask obscuring his face, was this text by Grade 11 Cleveland student, Joe: “The picture I picked is rather bizarre to some yet it has a certain person feel to me. I live in the wondrous city of Euclid, where the unemployed people roam and where the dingy, decaying, burned out factories of the 1950s are king. Really, Euclid isn’t that bad. It’s more like the entire Ohio area: There is nothing here! What else is a kid to do but retreat into his or her own oddities and become eccentric? I like to think I am a trendsetter of indifference and sarcasm. More like the crown prince of sarcasm. Still looking for my crown, I’m a strange kid myself. Strange at least to society norms. I would be more likely watching the *Star Wars* super trilogy (as I like to call it) and follow it up with reading books upon books, that I buy anytime I’m in Half Price book store, than watch anything to do with sports. What I am trying to get across is that i am different. Or at least i like to think I am different.” When Joe accepted an invitation to speak to Old Stone’s Sunday morning congregation, his story of feeling different struck a deep and resonating chord with youth, parents and grandparents – and others who feel like outsiders.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.throughstudentseyes.org](http://www.throughstudentseyes.org)

## ***Revitalizing the Congregation's Mission:***

### ***Find ministries for individual congregation members***

Beth remarks that the congregation has been supportive of the Gallery. "There's wine! They come!" One elderly man who is hard of hearing has become the wine steward for the Gallery's openings. People come to the kitchen window, and he can have a one-on-one conversation in an otherwise noisy and busy room. The beverage choice is Red or White, words easily heard or even lip-read. "He is my church bartender, which I think is hysterical. But what a gift for me. What a gift for him. And he just runs with it, he's got it down pat." The isolation that comes to many who experience a late-in-life hearing loss is transformed to connection as this man offers hospitality to congregational and community art lovers.

### ***Find ministries for historic congregational groups:***

Old Stone's Mission Committee does the many things that thriving downtown churches do to alleviate suffering and work for justice. And something else is blossoming. With the Justice Centre right down the block from Old Stone, a prison ministry is an obvious fit. A congregational team receives discharged inmates and helps them get back on their feet, helping them procure documents, find and furnish places to stay and other elements of re-entry. While prisons are joyless, difficult places, Beth maintains that a lot of what happens inside is creative – "there's a lot of time to draw, and there is a growing interest in showing some of that work. And for me, who has taught art, and for the artists in the congregation, this is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to be together, to learn together. This has been a wonderful surprise. We have another crew of women who are going into transitional housing and doing art there. Sometimes, when those guys and gals walk down the street and come here, it can be scary, but you put people around the table creating, and it's not so scary. It's a healthy way for us to be together."



***Be Open to the Spirit:***

For a church to offer hospitality to the arts, Beth has three simple words: “let God move. Receive God’s word with humility, knowing none of us know what’s in store. Because otherwise, you start to control, and then it gets to be way too much of a headache. Be trusting, be open. Let God move.”

### *Old Stone Questions:*

For small group conversation or personal reflection:

- “You work where? I thought that was a museum,” is a comment that Beth Giuliano heard in reference to Old Stone Church. How does your community view your church – museum (no signs of life), exclusive enclave, a visitors-welcome place, or a place the wider community feels at home? How might you begin to shift your church’s reputation in your community?
- At Old Stone, there is an attempt to clearly link Saturday night and Sunday morning, the concert and the worship. How do you feel the pastor’s greeting at the beginning of a concert is received by non-church audience members? Imagine you are asked to make this kind of greeting at a concert at your church – write down the remarks you would like to make. If you are in a group, read your welcoming speech to each other, and offer suggestions as “audience members”.
- Old Stone’s Gallery has a mandate of seeking artists who strive to be an active part in the dialogue towards the city’s faithful revitalization. Is this mandate too limiting, or is it helpful for a church gallery to have a clearly articulated mission? If your church was creating a gallery, how would you go about drafting a mission statement (who would you consult within and outside the church, what needs would you want your church’s gallery to meet, would the statement need the church board’s approval, how would you publicize your gallery’s mission statement to the community)?

## Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Cleveland

An easy eight-block walk east on Euclid Avenue from Old Stone Presbyterian is Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, located on a street once known as Millionaire's Row. Eight blocks is not a huge distance, but this walk begins with dazzling skyscrapers, then moves through the neon glory of the renewed theatre district, and on to the Cleveland State University area. On this journey, neighbourhood economic scars grow visibly as you move from west to east: empty store fronts, particle board covering the windows, and a grimy feel to increasingly desolate streets. Trinity Episcopal Church, where Tracey Lind put piazza theology into a redesign of the building and repurposing of the mission, is now responding to a changed context.

### ***Tough Times:***

#### ***A context doesn't last forever – be aware of the shifting...***

Trinity's Dean, Tracey Lind, outlines the new context of her Cleveland congregation. The recent economic recession has dealt a body blow to what was once America's fifth largest city. Formerly a thriving steel town, Cleveland lost more population in the last census decade than any other city besides New Orleans, she explains. In the aftermath of mortgage meltdowns, ten percent of the city's homes sit vacant – some of those homes used to belong to members of Trinity. What becomes of a church that reinvented itself with piazza theology when the economy goes sour?

#### ***...and how the shifting is shaking the church***

Maintaining a ministry of place is expensive (Trinity's budget is \$2million), and it is a ministry that doesn't necessarily benefit the congregants. It's a great model, Tracey says, but it doesn't build institutional stability. The hope was that the re-purposed Trinity Commons would be a place of destination for Clevelanders. When the Cathedral office was rebuilt, one space was converted into a gallery, but the issue became one of staffing and security – and drawing people. “So

much of our issue is that people just aren't down here, downtown," Tracey sighs. "It's tiring work to keep dealing with issues of security and cleanliness and order and money. And parking!" Being on the major public transit route in a car-culture has not brought people to the downtown. Being in an artsy city is both a help and a hindrance, creating a tension about what is "good" art and what kind of art should be hung in the cathedral, a kind of "snob appeal." A chamber music concert costs the cathedral ten thousand dollars (union wages), and is in competition with the Cleveland Orchestra. When the appetite was bigger than the pocket book for the Trinity-affiliated Music & Performing Arts Board, their money was soon spent. On my visit, Trinity was down to noon hour brown bag concerts, and most of those were organ, at slim to no cost to the cathedral. And, at slim to little appeal to the public.

In an age of institutional death, Cleveland has been hit hard. The steel mills are gone or much reduced. From the Big Three American auto companies to the YMCA and the Lions, institutions of business and institutions of volunteers are going down.

### ***Trinity Commons: A Piazza***

#### ***Draw on your denominational and congregational history***

Episcopal cathedrals carry with them the notion that they are a civic church, a church that sits in the center of the city and belongs to rich and poor, landowner and landless alike. The cathedral's ministry was to be a place of pilgrimage, education, worship, art, culture and charity. Cathedrals, Tracey Lind says, were the places that kept art alive during the dark ages. Bach's cantatas, Mozart's masses, Handel's choral works – the great music of the classic tradition was commissioned by the cathedrals, written for the glory of God, she says, but also to tell the Christian story in an age of illiteracy. The cathedrals also had a role as inns of *hospitality*, and, during the plague years, *hospice* became *hospital* (these three italicised words share the same root). Cathedrals were also places where the poor and persecuted could seek both charity and justice, and sometimes political sanctuary.

### ***...revision your history***

It was before the economic downturn that Trinity called Tracey Lind with her vision of transforming the cathedral into a piazza. In the year 2000, the idea of *restoring* the Cathedral as a gathering place for the community as a whole was embraced with excitement. Trinity was rebranded – the outdoor sign fronting one area of the cathedral complex now reads “Trinity Commons.” Tracey Lind explains, “We welcome 3,000 people a year to events that have nothing to do with ‘church.’ We have a cafe, a 10,000 Villages store, a huge music and performing arts ministry, a brown-bag concert series. It’s expensive to maintain this ministry of place, and it doesn’t necessarily benefit the congregants.”

The cathedral’s vision statement makes bold claims: “We will become one of the world’s great cathedrals, a vibrant community of faith and a leading institution in Cleveland. We will be a renowned international model of the church as sacred public space for celebration, culture, charity, commerce, conversation and collaboration in the heart of the city.”

### ***Draw in the neighbourhood***

Trinity’s piazza, or Commons, was completed in a 2002 redevelopment project. As well as the fair trade Cafe Ah-Roma, the piazza boasts an attractive public garden space with outdoor seating, directly across the street from the state university. The indoor piazza has pleasant seating, with a calming floor-to-ceiling fountain symbolizing the waters of life. In addition to rooms for church and non-church meetings, there are the draws of an art gallery, and a Ten Thousand Villages shop. The cathedral itself boasts a labyrinth, a noon-hour concert program, and an open-door policy. A Christmas season medieval feast, held in Trinity’s gothic sanctuary space, is a merry and boisterous fund-raiser for the Cathedral’s arts ministries. Given its location on Cleveland’s downtown main street and on a major public transit route, with the theatre district and the university

both close by, Trinity's place in its city is similar to Saskatoon's Refinery. This location should be the perfect spot to create a piazza. And for a time, it was. But what happens when times change?

### ***From Streetcar to Mall:***

#### ***Be aware of changes in your neighbourhood***

The downtown in many North American cities struggles to maintain its place as center and destination in an age of suburban sprawl. Some name this reality as streetcar wards and mall sprawl. The mall sprawl is a landscape organized around a single-occupant vehicle; some malls are designed to be so big that shoppers drive from one store to the other. A by-product of mall sprawl is the Big Box Church, which also boasts a big parking lot, and one-stop spiritual shopping. Often on the outskirts of urban areas, the Big Box Church is difficult to access except by private car. And because the Big Box is on the outskirts, it is not in a neighbourhood.

By contrast, Trinity Cathedral, like many older mainline churches, is in a streetcar ward, a diverse neighbourhood that was built for people, not cars. The streetcar ward assumes good public transit and lots of street traffic. Stores front onto the sidewalks, and rely on pedestrian trade. In a streetcar ward, driveways are few and far between. Located in old, historic neighbourhoods, the diversity of a streetcar ward can be seen in the diversity of its churches. In one such Ottawa ward, you can easily find Portuguese, Latvian, French, Spanish, Lutheran and United Churches, all within walking distance of each other, all blending in to the cityscape. Tragically, when the economy tanks and when institutions fail to show leadership, streetcar wards become transient zones – places people flee as neighbourhoods become vandalized shells and petty crime is on the rise. There was evidence of this in the neighbourhood around Trinity when i visited.

### ***Rethinking Church:***

#### ***When your context changes, change your church***

“You’re here at a funny time,” Tracey tells me, “because I think we have to reinvent the model. We’ve been so growing, and so upbeat,” Tracey says, “and now we’re in a different place. We’re looking at the back door of the piazza. When you have a theology that’s so open, that means people can leave as easily as they come in. But it’s not like they leave angry. They leave transformed.” A woman who came to Trinity as a single parent after a divorce found a place of stability that fed her in all kinds of ways. Increasingly, she took on a strong leadership role in the congregation. And then, she met someone, someone not into church, got married, and now maybe worships at Trinity three or four times a year. As church, Tracey says, we open our hearts when such people come in need and rejoice when they become a vital part of the congregation’s life. It is hard not to feel sad, or perhaps even bitter when after such a journey of transformation, these people then absent themselves. But Tracey recalls an *Ab-Ha* experience she had as a participant of a Bible study at the Taize community. The study focussed on the story of Jesus and Blind Bartaemeus (Mark 10: 46-52), although the insight fits with many of Jesus’ healing stories. When Jesus heals someone, what does he tell them but back you go, return to your community and live. Tracey says, “And what do we say? ‘Oh, come on in! Stay with us.’ I think that’s the paradox. I think people come here and do really hard work. My experience consistently is that people come to churches that are radically inclusive and hospitable to work on stuff. They come because they’re transitioning in a divorce, or in their gender identity or orientation, or because they’re transitioning with some illness – physical, emotional, mental – or maybe they come because they’re transitioning to Christianity! We are portals; we are doorways. And the bigger the transition for them, the less likely they are to stay. And I think some of that is embarrassment – I’ve done this work, and now I can start over and be a normal person. Part of it is that we say, go and live. Live your life. Do what God’s calling you to do. And if we believe that life is a journey, maybe then we’re just a stop on the journey.”

***Church as Adoptive Family and Way Station:***

### ***Reinventing the mission of hospitality***

One model of church, then, is to be a way station on the journey. This needn't negate other models – like the model of church as an intentional community of love, accountability and justice-seeking – but it is a challenge for those two models to live side-by-side. The way station people don't want to be held down or held back. The people for whom church is their family feel hurt and sometimes betrayed when people leave. Further, the long-term people are the ones who pay the bills to keep the building open and operational, and to pay the staff. It's tempting for them to feel a bit used, although these are often the same folks who fund inner-city outreach ministries where the results don't often generate more members and more people pledging. Can a congregation in a streetcar ward come to see its ministry as *both* intentional community *and* a way station for folks in transition? Can the intentional community folks see a healing ministry for those who will come join the congregation for a few years, get active and then get gone? And if they can see it, will they fund it?

### ***Keep Asking the Questions***

In wrestling with this, Tracey asks, “What is our urgent and absorbing errand in the world? What is unique about our role as Trinity Cathedral?” If a church were to disappear from its street corner, what would be missed by the community? “We are a place of good religion,” Tracey affirms, “and I think many people would miss that – I think God would miss that. Thinking people would miss that. We've been a place of good religion, and a place of action and witness.”



### *Trinity Cleveland Questions:*

For small group conversation or personal reflection

- Tracey Lind describes the role of the cathedral as that of a “civic church.” In what ways is your church a civic church? In what ways does your church resist or avoid that role? In what ways does your church belong to rich and poor alike? In what ways is your church place of pilgrimage, education, worship, art, culture and charity?
- What do you make of Tracey’s description of the “back door of the piazza”, that the church (for some) is a way station and not a long-term commitment to community? How does your congregation respond to people like the one Tracey described, people who come for healing, stay for a time, and then move on? Is this seen as generous hospitality, or is there a hope that hospitality will result in people staying?
- Trinity welcomes 3,000 people a year to events that have nothing to do with ‘church.’ These folks come to the cafe, the 10,000 Villages store, a musical performance or a brown-bag concert series. In tough economic times, is this a good use of Trinity’s resources, given these events don’t necessarily benefit the congregants? How do tough economic times make you feel about getting results from hospitality as opposed to offering hospitality without expectation of payback?
- What is your church’s “urgent and absorbing errand in the world”? How important are you to your community? Or to ask it in Tracey’s words, if your church disappeared, what would your community miss?

## Sydenham Street United

The wooden table in Beth Robinson's history-filled home in Kingston, Ontario once belonged to one William Kirby, author of Canada's first work of historical fiction, *The Golden Dog*. Robinson's old house is elegant in its display of art, almost as elegant as Beth herself. A member of Sydenham Street United, Beth hosted tea and conversation on a soggy Monday in June, just days away from celebrating her 90th birthday. Gathered in her living room to talk about their church's involvement with the arts were Sydenham Street members Barb Carr (visual artist), Norm Esdon (poet), and Elizabeth Macdonald (minister). The discussion of churches as sites of hospitality to the arts was expansive, thoughtful and lively. As the conversation unfolded, leadership of the minister and the congregation's ability to nurture artists of all ages both within and outside the church emerged as vital to Sydenham Street United's hospitality to the arts.

### *Reflecting on Experience*

Having had David Earle's Toronto Dance Theatre perform a Good Friday dance, *on* Good Friday, *in* the church, congregation members experienced an old, perhaps too familiar story in a bold new way. Beth recalled an experience some decades ago with the same dance company in a different congregation. Only slightly tongue-in-cheek, Beth recalled, "We had our own experience of crucifixion because of dance". Church folks in the late 1960s were shocked to see bare feet, let alone bare-chested male dancers and dancers of both sexes in tights leading a piece of worship. For some today, that overt physicality may still be startling or uncomfortable. But Norm, speaking of the recent Good Friday dance, recalls being "just *so* moved, to see the dancers comforting each other in the face of the crucifixion." The choreography brought the dancers fully into the worship space, not just the chancel, making Norm feel that "the Good Friday dance made me part of the dance, I lost self-consciousness and just dissolved." The ancient story of Good Friday, like a coin worn thin by

too much handling, here is given new life in its physicality, in its embodiment. The story becomes incarnate in the dancer's flesh, and takes on a fresh urgency.

***Leadership:***

***set a tone of hospitality to the arts...***

The folks who gathered at Beth Robinson's were clear that leadership sets the stage for a congregation's hospitality to the arts. "It takes a person who cares about the arts inserting it into the liturgy." This creates an openness, they affirmed, so that artists in the congregation say, "this is what we can offer." Norm recalled Elizabeth saying to him something as simple as, "I see your words as art", to be an extremely powerful affirmation for him. But leaders also need the support of their communities in setting a tone of hospitality for the arts, and the congregation of Sydenham Street is taking some strides in that.

***involve artists in worship to open other doors...***

The Cantabile Choirs of Kingston (seven choirs with some 250 voices) have their office and rehearsal space at Sydenham Street United. When a conductor of one of the Cantabile children's choirs received Elizabeth's invitation for the choir to sing in a worship service, a door opened. Marie Anderson, the conductor, was delighted that the young choristers saw what they were doing as worship, not performance. In turn, she proposed to the church a children and youth arts program that embraced spirituality more than traditional models of religious education. Many Gifts, One Spirit was born (more about that to follow).

***congregational leaders visible to local arts community...***

Elizabeth Macdonald begins most work days with a stop at Kingston's coffeeEco for her morning hit of caffeine and inspiration. The caffeine is in the coffee; the inspiration comes from the regulars, especially the charismatic Fernando Monte, whose life mirrors the film *Cinema Paradiso*. Shooting film every day is what Monte does. He's currently working on a trilogy based on the Bible's

wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job), with the conviction that this type of cinema needs to be made and seen. A work of art is not finished, he maintains, until there is an audience. He is bothered by cultural illiteracy – appalled with an audience of PhDs who had never heard of the Song of Songs. An exuberant extrovert, Fernando told me all this within the space of twenty minutes. His espresso-fuelled sunny energy is infectious. Others came and went during our morning conversation, all seeking a shot of Fernando’s creative joy, and sometimes inspired to add a demitasse of their own. Mark, a classics professor from Queen’s University, offered, “If you find a job you like, you’ll never work a day in your life.” In her regular morning java stop, there is mutuality in Elizabeth’s leadership as she offers affirmation and excitement to artists, and they do likewise about the artistic ministry unfolding at Sydenham Street United. This link between Kingston’s artistic community and Sydenham Street United is time well spent.

### ***NURTURE ARTISTS:***

#### ***in the wider community...***

A Springtime Salon art show hosted by Sydenham Street United celebrated arts in the congregation. Along with some congregation members’ photography, poetry, and painting came some surprises from the community – a Muslim woman exhibited her calligraphy, and a skateboarder whose only contact with the church was to access the food voucher program displayed his art made of broken skateboards. Well-received by those who did see it, the Springtime Salon was challenged by lukewarm congregational support – painful for those who had worked hard to make it happen. The reality of multi-function space is a challenge, particularly around staffing (how much is the church caretaker expected to do, for instance?). Yet, for most United Churches, our worship space is used once a week, maybe twice if that’s where the choir rehearses. Elizabeth noted that the Kingston Arts community likely uses Sydenham’s sanctuary more than the congregation. This sacred space, said the people at the gathering at Beth Robinson’s, can be offered as a gift to the Arts

community, and to the community of arts-lovers we call the audience. While needing to stay financially solvent, Sydenham Street seems to be shifting. Formerly, the congregation saw arts rentals for concerts and the like as *financing* its ministry; that is, irrelevant to the ministry except for the money it brings the church. Now, Sydenham Street is shifting to seeing its own ministry as one of nurturing the arts and being nurtured by the arts.

### ***Children's and youth's spirited art...***

Many Gifts, One Spirit, a new children and youth arts program, was born. Offering two opportunities to gather – one during Sunday worship, one on a weekday after school – Many Gifts, One Spirit (MGOS) has attracted participants not only from the congregation but from a wide variety of religious communities. Attention to space set a welcoming tone: the gathering spot for MGOS is brightly lit, and shelves are open so participants can see the materials available for their art. Keeping the Biblical stories open-ended so participants can draw, paint, dance, act their own interpretations is key, leader Marie Anderson affirms. With spirituality as the centerpiece, a “meal” ends each session – not the typical juice box and cookies Sunday school snack, but the breaking of bread together at a table set with a table cloth and real dishes. Around that table, Marie says, grace is not only said but experienced: “If you say ‘Thank you,’ you’ve learned something.” A Christmas production, “Calling All Angels”, united the Sunday morning and after school groups, as well as joining the younger folk with Sydenham Street’s adult choir. MGOS morphed into an intergenerational project, involving congregational and community members alike in a common artistic project.

### ***Intergenerational community...***

Drawing on her own musical background, Marie, MGOS and Sydenham Street United produced Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer’s opera, *Jonah*. The intergenerational cast consisted of people spanning a wide range of ages, educational backgrounds and experience. Ten special needs

adults from the neighbourhood showed up at the audition and won roles. The cast was musically diverse, too, ranging from professionals to those who had barely sung a note in public. The enthusiasm for creating something together made for a smooth working relationship, essential when half of the play was in pitch black (the children's favourite part!). While challenging all to do their best, Marie loosened the need for musical perfection. The result? "It wasn't perfectly in tune, but it was perfect." Shafer must have thought so, too – within a year, he was holding multi-age auditions at Sydenham Street for his new musical drama produced by MGOS, *Answer to Job*.

### ***Hospitality: It's Everybody's Job***

Asked for tips to churches offering hospitality to arts and artists, Marie flashed, "I expect hospitality. If it wasn't here, I wouldn't stay." It was as simple as a congregation member saying to her on her first Sunday at Sydenham, "Come sit with me here." That first impression made a huge impact. Marie also says what people are looking for in a church has undergone a seismic shift. "We're not looking to be saved anymore – rather, we're looking to connect with people who have a spiritual component to their lives, people who wish to make a change in the world with the gifts they have." MGOS gives participants the freedom to experiment with their own gifts. "The rigors of an art education or a technical education may not be the church's job," Marie says, "but we can expose children to a variety of arts, so they can find how they fit their own gifts with those arts. It's not the church's job to make sure children know their scales, but to give opportunities to experience symbolism, myth, beauty, hospitality."

### ***Think Through the Factors to Make it Work***

To make an artistic program like MGOS work, Marie advocates several items: budget, a crew of folks willing to help advertise the program to the wider community, dedicated space, and volunteers to be present to both the leader and the group. The programs cannot be offered to ensure institutional survival; rather the programs must be offered to nurture the gifts of children and

youth. Asked how a congregation might be more hospitable to the arts and artists, Marie adds: leadership (clergy must be on-side, seeking out creative folk within and outside the church), worship that isn't passive, a willingness to embrace new ideas, and to hire an artist to be the church administrator (someone who is accustomed to thinking creatively about the use of space).

***Nurture Artists for Worship:***

***choose a focus, plan ahead...***

In the spring of 2006, Elizabeth gathered some artists in the congregation of Sydenham St United, with an idea for a project. A visual artist (Barb Carr), a poet (Norm Esdon), a 90 year old arts booster (Beth Robinson), and some other congregation members (Lucinda Bray and Rosemary Robinson) began to hatch the idea, inspired by Mary Ford-Grabowski's book, *Stations of the Light*. Seeking to invite others into a deepening experience of the resurrection appearance stories, the group worked together to select from those stories one for each of the eight Sundays in the liturgical season known as the Great 50 Days of Easter. Engaging in a *lectio divina* process of group reflection and discussion from spring through fall, the group discerned that they would create an eight-part series of word, image, music and action-response for worship in the Great 50 Days of 2007. With the warmth of the conversations to inspire, when winter's cold winds came, the artist and the poet independently created works to speak to the selected resurrection stories. Barb Carr made eight mixed media pieces (20" X 25"), Norm Esdon composed eight new psalms, and the rest of the team developed eight Easter Actions.

Barb Carr's resurrection images are of mixed media, created with many layers of tissue and other papers overlaid on a background colour wash of acrylic paint. Each image includes a circle (symbol of unity, eternity, completeness), one of eight colours (the 3 primaries, the 3 secondaries and black and white), a natural form of light (sun, moon, northern lights in this image) and often a reference to the Ontario landscape (a trillium, northern lights).

Norm Esdon's new psalms have a contemporary flavour while speaking to ancient stories. In response to the story of the risen Jesus' appearance to the disciple traditionally labelled "Doubting Thomas", Norm wrote:

...Bless you, Wise and Holy One,  
For giving us Honest Thomas –  
for one brave enough to reveal what's on his mind  
And in his heart;  
For one whose daring to ask and to seek  
Enables us to find what we dare neither ask nor seek.

### ***The Art Serves the Worship***

During worship each Sunday, the relevant new visual work was displayed in a prominent place in the sanctuary, and the words of a new psalm were recited. The team then asked Ashley Vanstone to play some meditative music in worship to give congregation members the opportunity to deepen their reflection on these new expressions of ancient resurrection stories. Instead, he composed new music for each of those Sundays. Barb Carr's art was professionally photographed, and graced the worship bulletin covers during that season.

### ***Dedicate and Invite the Community***

On Pentecost Sunday of that year, the *From Light Into Light* series was formally dedicated during worship, and celebrated by the wider community that evening. From the outset, the team's hospitable vision included the congregation and beyond – people from the wider church and the Kingston community, particularly those who come into the sanctuary to attend a wide range of concerts, performances and other events. "The hope is to offer spiritual nurture through image and word to anyone who comes into the sanctuary for whatever reason regardless of whether they have any religious affiliation," states a brochure prepared by the team. The images and corresponding new



psalms are hung around Sydenham Street United's sanctuary, continuing to enrich worship and speak to others who enter that sacred space.

### ***Celebrate Recognition***

The congregation is justifiably proud that *From Light Into Light* won a Bene visual arts award from Ministry and Liturgy magazine in 2010. The impact of *From Light Into Light* continues to be felt – original committee member Rosemary Robinson has since self-published one book of poetry and soon will do likewise with a second, her photos have been displayed at the annual Kingston Women's Arts Festival and the Kingston Arts Tour; further, she has just launched her own website.

### ***Diversify – include the edgy***

Lest this all sounds Arty with a capital A, remember the skateboarder who created a piece out of broken bits of skateboard for the Sydenham Salon. The church was also the venue for former punk rocker Henry Rollins in an aggressive three hours of riotous political satire. There is a place for the edgy as well as the sublime.

### ***Acknowledge that prayer has many forms***

Like the wooden table in Beth Robinson's living room, the woodwork in the sanctuary of Sydenham Street United is historic. Beth feels that that woodwork holds the prayers of the decades past. "If we're ever at a loss for our own prayers, the building will pray for us." The prayers are not only those of Sydenham Street United members, but of composer R. Murray Shafer and tattooed performance artist Henry Rollins – the prayers of artists who have found in that place a place for their art.

### *Sydenham Questions:*

For small group conversation or personal reflection

- The group at Beth Robinson's and the leader of the Many Gifts, One Spirit program identified leadership as a foundation to a church offering hospitality to the arts. How could the leaders in your congregation build a sense of congregational buy-in rather than hospitality to the arts belonging to only a few people in your church?
- Sydenham Street United nurtures artists in four arenas – the wider community, children and youth, intergenerational, and arts in worship. How is your church already participating in nurturing arts in those areas? Which of those four areas generates the most spiritual excitement for you? How could you imagine putting that excitement to work in your church?
- In telling about the Jonah musical, Marie Anderson noted that she needed loosen her need for musical perfection. Can you recall a time in your church's life when the need for perfection was relaxed in order to allow broader participation? How does your church offer hospitality to new artists within the congregation?
- How can the edgy and the sublime (a Henry Rollins and a classical choir) co-exist in the same church? What does an openness to a wide variety of art communicate to the congregation? what does it communicate about the congregation to the wider community? Is there a need to manage that message, or is this another place to let go of perfection in favour of broader participation?

## **Trinity St. Paul's United: Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts**

Near the intersection of Toronto's subway lines, Trinity St Paul's United Church has a strong presence in the Annex. This neighbourhood has been home to authors Margaret Atwood, Morley Callaghan and Dennis Lee, as well as urban activist Jane Jacobs. The Royal Ontario Museum, the University of Toronto and the Royal Conservatory of Music are east of the church; to the west along Bloor Street are shops, restaurants, bars, and an ever-changing immigrant community. Not unlike New York's city's Greenwich Village neighbourhood, the area around Trinity St Paul's is vigorous, somewhat bohemian, somewhat yuppie. The ethos of Trinity St Paul's (or TSP as it is affectionately known) is a good fit for this neighbourhood. Its declared mission is to be a Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts.

### ***OPEN SPIRIT:***

#### ***...draw on your history of hospitality...***

In 1980, when St Paul's Avenue Road United closed the doors of its building and amalgamated with Trinity United, it came as a package deal. St Paul's Centre, housed in the Avenue Road church, was home to a wide variety of justice-focussed NGOs. Near Toronto's Yorkville neighbourhood (then the city's nonconformist neighbourhood), St Paul's welcomed American draft-dodgers and had a ministry with "Helen's hippies", so named after the woman who spearheaded this outreach ministry. St Paul's brought that spirit of openness and radicalism to the amalgamation. Trinity United had a strong music program and a fair bit of pride in its Cassavant organ; it also has its own heritage of justice, including the outspoken liberation theologian and China missionary (as they were called then), Katherine Hockin and offering welcome to Dr. James Endicott, shunned during the Cold War for his communist sympathies. When Rev. Bill Phipps joined the staff ('74-'83) and brought his unquenchable passion for justice, the newly amalgamated congregation articulated their justice-seeking identity even more strongly. A student of community organizer Saul Alinski, Phipps brought a fierce and faithful passion for justice to the forefront at TSP. All these things coming together in one congregation created a synergy that has attracted justice-seeking NGOs and artists who make the building their home.

#### ***...welcome diverse groups to use your building...***

The renters on the sign board when i visited (June, 2010) included: Abbeyfield Houses (non-profit housing for seniors), the Canadian Peace Alliance, the Toronto Health Coalition, and the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies and Languages, as well as Tafelmusik, the Toronto Consort, and the Viva Youth Singers, among others. TSP is host to five different 12-Step Programs. TSP's Dance

Studio is one of the hottest spaces in demand by renter/teachers running the gamut of dance styles: ballet, capoeira, salsa, and English Country Dance. Other classes include Qui Gong, Tai Chi, Yoga, Children's Art Theatre, the Youngest Shakespeare Company and A Course in Miracles. As well as an office coordinator and maintenance person, the building coordinator has eight staff who serve as building attendants.

***...have a plan, but stay open.***

The logistics of juggling all this seem daunting. Like many large churches, TSP has a five year strategic plan, but Bill Fallis, chair of TSP's Worship & Faith Formation Circle, suggests "sitting loose" rather than worrying about staying in control. The challenge is to keep open, he says, to let the Spirit shape what this Centre of Faith, Justice and the Arts will become. . A strong structural plan may not be what's needed; rather the willingness to let things evolve, enter a time of ambiguity and confusion, and have faith that there will be some collective wisdom in the conversation among artists and church folks.

***FAITH:***

***...connecting with God...***

The church's business, maintains TSP's music director, Brad Ratzlaff, is connecting with God. Artists also are trying to connect with something bigger, something outside themselves, and the church would be wise to reach out to them. That TSP has chosen to name itself a Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts builds a consciousness that has opened the congregation to a wide variety of worship styles. The TSP Choir and the Viva Youth Singers presented Ariel Ramirez' folk mass, *Misa Criolla*, a mass using the indigenous rhythms and melodies of South America. Not a concert, this music was presented in worship as part of the communion liturgy. A few weeks after that, both choirs provided music for a celebratory Eco-fest service. The worship was followed by a lunch of fresh, local foods, workshops on greening your house, the blessing of cyclists and bikes, and the day culminated in a concert by TSP residents *Tafelmusik* entitled "Forces of Nature."

***...connecting artists with your spiritual space...***

The members of *Tafelmusik*, Toronto's preeminent baroque orchestra whose home base is this church, have a deep affection for the sanctuary of TSP, and for the people who work there. "Sanctuaries have an ethos, a spirit appreciated by the musicians," says Alison MacKay, *Tafelmusik's* bass player and member of TSP. In some inarticulate way, Alison maintains, playing in a concert hall is a different experience than playing in a church. That said, being in a church can sometimes be a barrier. *Tafelmusik* does some educational programming for schools, and some Muslim children

won't come to a church. A small series of three concerts in the North York neighbourhood saw strong Jewish support, but would not have worked with that audience in the church, she says. Alison's partner, David Fallis, is the director of early music chamber ensemble *The Toronto Consort* and also a member of TSP. Alison and David both cited the importance of having large spaces for public gatherings as a strong part of what a church is for, whether as a concert venue or for an all-candidates meeting at election time. St Paul's Episcopal Church near New York City's ground zero, they noted, offers sanctuary to those wishing a quiet, meditative place to sit with the horrors of 9/11.

***...connect worship, art and community issues...***

About ten years ago, when Bill Kervin's ministry shifted from congregational to academic (he's on faculty at nearby Emmanuel College), his spouse chose TSP as their new church home. The passions of the people create the worship life of the congregation, Bill believes, and that this church is addressing the communal poverty in public life through its public witness provides an entry point for some people. A teacher of worship, Bill notes that the announcements are a high worship moment in this congregation. The Metamorphosis Festival a few years ago brought together artists, musicians and mental health folks (Toronto's Queen Street Hospital was using art as a healing method). One aspect of that Festival was a worship service at TSP, with musical contributions from Alison McKay and David Fallis, huge pieces of art by people with mental illnesses hanging from the balcony, and readings from Ovid connected to the Christian narrative of resurrection. Worship at its best, insists Bill Kervin, is the original multi-media event. In this example, TSP's worship was not *the* event, but a contribution to a larger event.

***...let performers widen your worship music...***

With *Tafelmusik* onsite, and the congregation's own ethos around the classical repertoire, Bill feels the leadership of music director Brad Ratzlaff has offered an infectious respect for a wider variety of music in worship, without seeing one genre as superior to another. "It's about what fits in the liturgy," says Bill, "not what's old or what's new." Instead of seeing music as the royal battleground for churches, Bill suggests that we invite congregations to see the encounter with a new musical genre as an encounter with a new world – "It's like I got off the plane in India and I thought I was going to my own comfort zone." A posture of listening, openness and curiosity about church music, as we would have in a cross-cultural experience, will take us to new places of the heart in worship. Learning to listen to jazz or classical music, he says, is a cultural encounter, a brush with diversity. New music (or "new to us" music) invites us into another world, another culture.

## ***JUSTICE: MAKING A PLACE FOR PASSION***

### ***...announcements as testimony...***

On Tuesday mornings at 9:30 sharp, members of TSP's worship planning group gather to debrief last Sunday and plan for next. These gatherings are open to any, although the timing restricts those with day jobs. In one debrief conversation, the most deeply felt part of the past Sunday's worship was the announcements, a time in many churches when minds wander and the pot roast is contemplated. Here, there was a sense of testimony as passions for justice were articulated and inspired. Visitors that Sunday, one person reflected, got a real sense of what TSP is about. Indeed, the website *Ship of Fools'* Mystery Worshipper<sup>1</sup> report about TSP says in part:

### **Which part of the service was like being in heaven?**

I wouldn't normally say this, but the announcements (called "life and work of our congregation") were so well integrated into worship that it felt this was all part of their Christian life. This was followed by a musical prayer, which was sensitively played and led to the readings. It all seemed very holy.

### ***...justice as the heart of worship...***

Attention turned to planning the next worship, which was also the congregational picnic and thus in an outdoors setting. Themes were offered, argued over and hashed out. Is it patronizing for white people to have a First Nations' Sunday? Given there are solidarity groups working on land claims issues within the congregation, does that give some integrity? One person noted that what Aboriginal people want is "less for us to use their spirituality and more for us to get on-side politically." The challenge of having difficult content in an out-doors service and making it child-friendly was raised. Another person felt that if someone told the story of the United Church's history with First Nations people with passion and conviction, the congregation would listen. "Listening more" was seen as one stop on the cycle of praxis: the church listens, learns, acts, listens more.

### ***...worship that shares the wider community's concerns...***

Later, ministry staff Hans van Nie and Vicki Obedkof spoke of the challenge of living in a post-Christian culture. "People want us here, and love what we're doing, but don't want to come to church," one of them said. The other remarked that one person got involved at TSP because a family member was – the new person is an atheist who seems to have found a home here. At TSP

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.shipoffools.com/mystery/2010/1912.html> (Feb 2, 2011)

for two years now, Hans and Vicki enjoy the feel of being in a creative environment, where shared space is a given. Liturgical items get moved all the time, and the acoustic needs of *Tafelmusik* and other groups limits the kind of visual arts displayed in the sanctuary (fabric arts wreak havoc with sound). Living into the mandate to be a Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts takes a small, committed group to pay attention to hospitality and banish the notion of “our” space. There is a sense of trust that whoever is passionate about something will make it happen here. Services with a focused theme such as the Ecofest worship or First Nations Sunday draw in some from the wider community. But Vicki noted that while these focussed services have a broad appeal, promoting them outside the church is a challenge.

### ***ARTS: THE HOUSE BAND:***

#### ***...foster a long-term relationship with a performance group***

*Tafelmusik* is a German word, meaning “table music” or “music for the feast.” Founded in 1981, the *Tafelmusik* ensemble is one of the most prolific and critically acclaimed orchestras in the world. They perform 50 concerts annually, tour extensively, and have a discography of 76 CDs that have garnered many national and international awards. Over their years of co-habiting at TSP, a deep relationship of trust has formed between *Tafelmusik* and this church. The congregation strongly supports the orchestra. Many congregation members are subscribers and several of *Tafelmusik*’s musicians are members of the congregation.

A few years ago, the congregation and the orchestra had a serious conversation about reversing roles in the building, so that *Tafelmusik* would become the landlord, and the congregation would join the list of tenants. The congregation voted in favour of this arrangement. While appreciating the offer, *Tafelmusik* declined. They decided their focus is their music, not running and maintaining an ageing physical plant.

#### ***...build relationships of mutual trust...***

TSP members Alison McKay (*Tafelmusik*) and her partner David Fallis (a conductor and member of the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Music) spoke with warmth and gratitude about the long-term relationship between the orchestra and the church. With its offices located in the church, and as many as ten concerts annually held at TSP, *Tafelmusik* is more than a major tenant – they are like another congregation. (TSP’s building is also the home of the Bathurst Street United congregation and, until its recent dissolution, the Metropolitan Community Church’s Christos congregation). Alison and David spoke of the deep relationship of trust between TSP and *Tafelmusik*,

evidenced in the trading-places proposition. Without that long-standing relationship, such an idea would not have been imagined, much less taken seriously.

***...seek spirituality in the performers...***

Walter Pittman, who calls himself “a Baptist who fell among politicians”, was attracted to the United Church because of its strong social gospel – and its welcome. An educator and an advocate, he also has a passion for the arts. For five years, Walter chaired the Ontario Arts Council. . It was *Tafelmusik* that brought him to TSP. He quotes conductor Jeanne Lamon: “We realize that playing here is a different experience than anywhere else in the world. We feel the spirituality of this place, its intimacy, its caring.” A lifelong student of music, Walter describes orchestras as being filled with people who really want to be soloists, a boiling pot of ego and infighting. The conductor’s job, he says, is to keep things from erupting. But in the world of *Tafelmusik*, other values are evident: “I’ve never seen a group with greater respect for each other.” Respect is also the word he uses to describe the congregation’s relationship with the orchestra. When the trading places conversation was happening (whereby *Tafelmusik* would own the building and the congregation become the tenant), the people of TSP were clear the orchestra must be kept intact and not be compromised.

***...re-enfranchise artists...***

Bill Kervin believes that the Protestant church has largely lost our relationship with artists, save musicians and poets/writers. “The tragic loss of the Reformation is that we disenfranchised artists who wanted to praise God and serve community, which has left us in a state of aesthetic poverty. We have more art in our homes than in our churches – what does that say about us?” Echoing earlier comments by Brad Ratzlaff, Alison McKay and David Fallis, Bill maintains that the term “secular artist” is an oxymoron. Artists see themselves as engaged in spiritual activity, engaging the human condition in profound ways. “Isn’t it a tragedy that we aren’t in the same house, talking to each other?”

At TSP, the players are in the same house, but time for talking to one another is a scarce commodity. Yet, within that synergy is a positive perfect storm, as irresistible, irreducible forces come together and, in a kind of alchemy, create something precious: faith, justice and the arts, walking hand in hand.



### *Trinity St Paul's Questions:*

For small group discussion or personal reflection:

- TSP's music director said that the church naming itself as a Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts built a consciousness that opened the congregation to a wider variety of worship styles. The Metamorphosis worship service would be an example. What is the relation between a church naming itself and the congregation being more open? What "naming" in your congregation could lead to more openness to a variety of worship styles?
- Balancing the needs of renters with the needs of the congregation can be challenging. At TSP, the needs of Tafelmusik for hard surfaces for acoustical reasons has limited the use of fabric arts in the sanctuary. What kind of compromises about the sanctuary would your congregation be willing to make to offer hospitality to the arts? What is non-negotiable?
- Walter Pitman spoke of the respect with which the members of Tafelmusik treat each other, as opposed to divas fighting for the spotlight. Does the fact that Tafelmusik makes its home in a church help to set a tone of respectful cooperation – if so, how? What might Tafelmusik teach church folks about how to behave?
- Bill Kervin is of the opinion that the term "secular artist" is an oxymoron – that all artists are spiritual. TSP's music director said that artists are trying to connect with something bigger, something outside themselves. How do you experience art as breaking down the barrier between sacred and secular? In the Christian doctrine of the incarnation (Jesus, the Word made Flesh), is that barrier broken down? If so, why do some churches still banish some art forms?
- At TSP, artists, social activists and church folk are in the same building. How might your church invite that mix of people into a conversation about the human condition, social change, and spirituality? Who in your community would you invite?

## The Church in The Wild Wood

Since its publication in 1963, generations of children have revelled in Maurice Sendak's untamed story, *Where The Wild Things Are*. A journey of rebellion and return, the story is a wild rumpus full of mischief. *Where The Wild Things Are* liberated children's literature from its do-gooding straight-jacket. Offering hospitality to the arts holds out a similar promise for the church – that we might be liberated from our goody-two-shoes reputation and freed to live out a wild gospel making holy mischief in the world.

Opening the church door to the arts also opens the door to the wild wood – to conflict or the potential for conflict. All churches have art of some kind – worship itself is an art form (music, banners, spoken word) and church architecture is an art. These fall under the category of *expected* arts. But what about the role of art to make wild mischief, to offer an alternate vision, to challenge the status quo? Disruptive turning of the tables is never popular, as Jesus discovered. What might a congregation consider in pondering whether its calling is to offer hospitality to the arts?

### **Big Picture Considerations: Wild Things in Sacred Space**

The year Mount Royal United Church in Saskatoon did a big (by our standards) Christmas musical, i took down the cross. Located on a residential backstreet of a quiet suburb, Mount Roayl was a small congregation in a building not unlike many rural churches – sanctuary upstairs, small kitchen and large multi-purpose room in the basement. The sanctuary was the Christmas musical's performance space, and the cross (a large wooden one suspended from the ceiling by wire) distracted from scenes that were set in a doctor's office, a rural coffee shop, or out in the sheep fields. As director and author of the show, i took down the cross. As minister of the congregation, i should have consulted, but didn't. Most in the congregation either didn't notice or didn't care – the congregation was small enough that almost everyone was involved in the show in some way. The man who had made the cross – also the choir's only male soloist – was annoyed. "It's not built for

that,” he told me. Although he had been encouraged to audition for the show, he could not imagine singing without the security of sheet music and words in hand. He did not audition. And when show time came, he and his spouse went on a road trip.

*It's not built for that.* By way of confession, i would need to say that i did not hear those words as that man's minister, but as a director of a theatrical production. Of course it – the cross – was built for that – “for that” being to be taken down. The cross was on pulleys and wires; it was a job so easy that even i could (and did) do it. i likened it to contemporary funeral homes, whose back room props include an empty cross for Protestant funerals, a crucifix and candle stands for Catholic funerals, flags for Legion funerals, projectors and screens for power-point funerals, everything mobile to meet presenting needs. But my parishioner's *It's not built for that* i now see as a comment bigger than that particular cross in that particular situation. Had i been less in Director mode and more in Minister mode, he and i might have had a deep conversation about sacred space, the place of the arts in the church, symbols of faith, and how hospitality to the arts might mean, in this case, a temporary change. We might have talked about what the church is built for. My Christmas musical was not Christmas to this individual – it was pushed him out of his usual place in the congregation (the star tenor), and put aside the work of his hands (the star carpenter). All of which never entered my mind at the time. As author of the play, i delighted in retelling the nativity story in a contemporary prairie world of villainous bankers and farm foreclosures, unexpected pregnancies, a preacher rendered mute for doubting the angels' good news, comic-relief bumpkins looking for their sheep, and the hope of the world born in a barn. As director of the play, i delighted in the alchemy of working together with diverse people on a common project. i delighted in the growing excitement of cast and crew and production staff as the neighbourhood clamoured for tickets. i laughed off *It's not built for that*. Of course, it was built for that! So many wonderful things were happening!

*It's not built for that.*

Are the arts where the wild things are? does art in church create a wild rumpus? Does art in church make *holy* mischief? Or only mischief? Or is it true that the church *isn't built for that*? Are wild things unwelcome in dedicated spaces?

### ***Dedicated Spaces***

There is something to be said for dedicated space.

- A recent school of thought about Christian education for children instructs leaders to create a special place, a quiet place of soft whispers and hushed reverence, where we walk sedately and spend much time listening for God.
- A writing teacher instructs his students to make a physical place for writing, go there at the same time every day to write, write there and if no writing comes, think about writing. Keep that space and time dedicated for that purpose.
- A yoga instructor instructs her students to make a physical place for yoga, go there at the same time every day to practice.
- A doctor tells an insomniac to take the television, lap top, and pile of books out of the bedroom and make the bedroom a place that is only for sleep. There is something to be said for dedicated space.

And ancient Christian wisdom says there is something to be said for dedicating space to a purpose, for keeping sacred space sacred. The Rule of St. Benedict puts it this way:

Let the oratory [chapel] be called what it is, a place of prayer;

and let nothing else be done or kept there.

When the Work of God [worship] is ended,

let all go out in perfect silence,

and let reverence for God be observed,

so that any sister who may wish to pray privately

## will not be hindered by another's misconduct. (Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter 52)

But unlike the Benedictine community bound by the Rule of St. Benedict, we Protestants do not worship five times daily, at least not within the sanctuaries of our church buildings.

When i was about ten years old, our Sunday school class learned the story of the boy Jesus in the Temple, the story in which his parents did not know his whereabouts (Luke 2:41-52). The thought of accessing the holy space of suburban Toronto's Zion Wexford United Church thrilled me, and i decided to do what Jesus did – particularly the part about not telling my parents where i was going. One day after school, i rode my blue CCM bicycle to the church, found an unlocked door and went into the sanctuary, where i sat, waiting for something fabulous to happen. The secretary popped her head in, no doubt having heard my entrance. i groaned inwardly – she was a friend of my mother's and would likely tell. i wanted to keep my visit to the church between me and God. The secretary didn't speak to me and withdrew. Did she see me or not, i wondered. i continued to sit, waiting for something to happen. Next, the minister appeared, looking a bit startled, a bit concerned, and asked me if everything was okay. Yes, i replied, wishing he would go away. "Are you praying?" he asked in a tone of voice that bewildered me. It seemed like the right answer would be "yes" but i hadn't been praying, just waiting. Still, saying that i was praying seemed like a response that (a) the minister would like and then (b) the minister would leave me alone, which was what i wanted. Instead, My "Yes" provoked another uncomfortable question: "How did it go?" Startled, i replied, "Fine, thanks." And at that, the minister withdrew. A short time later, i slunk out of the church, got back on my bike and rode home, wondering if my mother's friend the secretary or maybe the even the minister himself would phone my home and rat me out. And then what would i say? How could i explain my behaviour to my parents when i couldn't even explain it to myself?

i tell this story not to underline what a pious little thing i was, but what an odd thing it was (and mostly still is) for anyone to show up at a Protestant church to worship outside of a Sunday

morning. We mostly worship once a week, with occasional extra services of worship such as funerals, weddings, or seasonal Lenten or Advent services outside of Sunday morning. Yet there is still a sense, at least for some people, that the sanctuary should be dedicated space, holy space, space used only for worship.

Unless, of course, it is being used for church-sanctioned activities: the place of the congregational talent show, the holding-pen for customers awaiting the Fowl Supper, the choir's rehearsal hall, the convivial uproar of the wedding rehearsal. While *not built for that*, exceptions are regularly made.

No matter how old or modern a building, a church is a treasure chest of memories: grandpa's funeral, an aunt's wedding, a child's appearance as an angel in the Christmas pageant, a loved one's solo, people prayed with and prayed for. We protect what we treasure – we keep valuables in safety deposit boxes, our money in banks. What happens when a treasured worship space is used for something unexpected? What are the spoken and unspoken expectations of the congregation about the use of the church's space, and what happens when those expectations are challenged? What happens when “wild things” come into the sanctuary or other places in the church building?

### **Resisting the Wild Things**

Ian Fillingham is a self-identified curmudgeon, and a member of Crescent Fort Rouge United in Winnipeg, where he is a long time member of the choir, the property committee, and also dances weekly in the church with a community Morris Men group. A retired teacher, Ian now works as a contractor. He knows Crescent's building, from the lofty attic where he climbs to change light bulbs to the bowels of the boiler. At times, he can be grumpy about Crescent's renters and their impact on the building he loves.

While freely admitting that the sanctuary is a performing space and that Sunday morning worship is theatre, Ian is also clear that there is a sacredness to the space: “you walk in, and you feel comforted, a sense of holiness.” In his view, the big box churches have a spirituality that is *internal* to people, whereas Crescent’s spirituality is internal, but also external, space-oriented: “the age, the history. It goes beyond architecture. It’s the aura of the building.” The way the space is used is important, he maintains, and “we need to hang on to the building’s spirit.” On a Sunday morning, as church folk arrive, they need to feel they are arriving in church, he contends, not a concert hall or a theatre.

Rentals bring in money, he acknowledges, but they also stress the building. Choirs are getting larger. He cites two examples: Winnipeg’s Rainbow Harmony Project (the LGBTQ and friends choir) now has fifty singers, and the Winnipeg Philharmonic and several other choirs use risers, which mean more wear-and-tear on the building (loading and unloading) and on the chancel floor. Although designed to seat 800, this is far from the current Sunday morning norm. A wildly successful concert that fills the church also places stresses on a hundred year old building. There is a tension, Ian notes, in being a “public building that receives no public funding.”

There is also a tension in a congregation being housed in a gorgeous, elderly sanctuary with shrinking numbers and an eagerness to both offer hospitality and also receive rental income. But if the needs of renters interfere with the needs of worship, then what? A large choir using risers rehearses on a Saturday for a Sunday afternoon show – can they leave the risers up, or do they need to be removed for worship and then re-installed? How often can that happen before the choral group looks for a more accommodating space? How often can risers be left up for worship before it stops feeling like “church”, at least to some in the congregation?

Renters pay rent, Ian says, but congregation members do more to maintain the space. As well as supporting the needs of the building through financial offerings, church folks put in

countless volunteer hours, from fund-raising teas to weather-stripping parties. Sometimes, Ian feels that renters “make decisions at our expense without consulting us.” Problem is, it is unclear who is the “us” who needs to be consulted. At best, churches are unwieldy institutions with complex decision-making structures. Renter groups come in for one rehearsal one day, with a show the next. They bring excitement, creativity and urgency – they need to know right this minute if they can move the carefully decorated Christmas tree or run a power cord down the aisle of the church. For them, a decision needs to be made before next month’s board meeting.

Ian suggests Crescent needs a building manager to quell the chaos on both sides – one person. Yet experience in other Winnipeg churches with that model has been less than positive with burn-out and insufficient checks and balances.

Some of Ian’s curmudgeonliness is wrapped up in loss and change. While pleased that Crescent’s renovations to the chancel space kept the character and architecture intact, he grieves that “my communion table” (one he built) got sidelined in favour of something more portable. A marble baptismal font from one of the early churches of Crescent’s amalgamation is still in the sanctuary, but no longer used. It, too, was replaced. “This is part of our history that is being retired” Ian says. According to Ian, there is a sense that “there is a culture we no longer know”, not only in the church but in the wider Canadian culture. At a local school’s Remembrance Day ceremony, the teacher leading the proceedings put his hand over his heart during *O Canada*. “That’s not what we do,” Ian says, “he got that from American television.” His sense of loss includes a worry about the United Church of Canada as a denomination. What is United Church culture? Likening it to the Remembrance Day example, Ian says people assume they know what it is, and they don’t.

Ian and I agree that the use of space is a spiritual struggle for us. Are our churches temples, to be used only for worship? Are they sanctuaries, giving space to refugees in conflict with the



system? Are they piazzas, spaces of intersection and public meeting? Can our churches be many things at different times, many things at the same time, or only one thing all the time?

### ***Thinking about your Physical Plant***

When congregational expectations about sacred space are compromised, they can turn into the kind of wild things that will bite you. What is your congregation's treasure chest of memories? Is the place of holy treasure only the sanctuary, or are there some other sites in the church building that are equally sacred to at least some people? Are there areas of the building that some groups within the church feel ownership of: the kitchen, the choir room, the Sunday school storage area, the nursery? What happens when others use these spaces? How often is your building used by community groups? Is the congregation aware of that usage? How much is your building considered public space and a resource for the wider community, or is it seen as a place for "us"? Does the congregation believe that the building has a ministry of space – a treasure – to offer the wider community, or does the congregation see its treasured building as belonging to "us" and view others who might use it (A.A. members, Scouts) as wild things?

### ***The Devil in the Details:***

As well as those big picture issues, the devil in the details will wreak havoc unless attention is paid. What follows may seem daunting, but it is far from exhaustive. Your own context must be taken into account – there is no "one size fits all."

### ***Staffing***

Who will be responsible for handling requests for bookings, and how much time will that take? Should that person be a staff member or a congregational volunteer? If you have a church secretary or administrator, that person will become the first responder simply by answering the telephone or email query – will the volume of these requests necessitate a change in job description or even hours and pay? How much scope of decision-making is given in that job description? What

kind of requests, if any, would need Board approval? Who will collect any rental fees and determine that insurance has been procured for non-church events? Who will act as caretaker and/or security for non-church events? Do you add hours to your paid caretaker (and build that into the rental fee)? Do you find volunteers in the congregation to take that on? Who will liaise between the arts group and the various congregational stake holders? In a large urban church with good acoustics, the rental of space can take a lot of time and energy of both staff and volunteers – how do you support those folks in a ministry of hospitality to the arts?

### ***Insuring the Building and Users are Covered***

There are more practical considerations as well. Insurance will cover any mishap at a congregational event, but what of an outside group using the space? It may be assumed that a church's mission might include an A.A. group or a fund-raising concert for the denomination's inner-city agency. The same may not be assumed for the local high school jazz band concert – is it a church event or not? There may be ways to partner with non-church groups – a visual artist looking for display space might offer an art class to a church group, for instance, or a one-act play might be followed by a panel discussion exploring theological themes – these would then become church events. Your insurance carrier can offer you some guidelines. While it may be tempting to go full steam ahead and damn the torpedoes, should an accident occur you want to be sure the church is covered.

### ***Relationships: the Congregation and the Renters***

How will you balance the need of the congregation to have events with the needs of renters? December is a prime time for choral concerts. How will your choir react when they go in October to book their Christmas cantata and find every Friday, Saturday and Sunday already booked by other groups? Is there an expectation or hope that the congregation will support the “outside” groups who rent your space as a venue, thus supporting the ministry of hospitality to the arts? Or is there a sense

that these renters are outsiders with their own audiences. Will you ask for space in the concert program of a renter to invite its audience to the Fall Supper or the Christmas Eve service, or to tell about some of the outreach ministries you are about as a way to welcome folks into the life of your congregation – if so, who will prepare that material?

***What can you offer?***

And what about physical concerns? When Crescent Fort Rouge United in Winnipeg first started hosting concerts, the sanctuary seated 800 but the two washrooms each seated one. After renovations, the women's has several stalls (including one for the disabled), and the men's has several urinals as well as stalls. Are your washrooms sufficient to meet the demands of the renters? Can you build in to your rental rates the extra cost of toilets flushing and use of paper towels? Again, note the increase in work for the caretaker or the volunteers who do that job. If you have 500 people at a performance on Saturday night, the washrooms and other public spaces will need to be cleaned before Sunday morning worship.

How accessible is your building for those with mobility challenges?

Who is allowed access to your musical instruments, and who decides?

Who is allowed access to your sound system? Will they need orientation or training? Who will do that? Who will make contact between the renter and the congregation's sound person? Ask similar questions about your projector and screen. Would an outside group be permitted to use your kitchen facilities? Again, whose job is it to orient them to the space and the expectations about its use, and who will make the contact between the renter and the kitchen person(s)? If your congregation has policies about Fair Trade coffee, does that apply to the renter's intermission refreshments? If your congregation seeks to live in respect with creation by not using disposable plates or cups, does that apply to the renters as well? You will also need to be clear with your renters whether or not raffles, lotteries, bingos and smoking are permitted.

What about storage areas (a theatre group may have props or wardrobe pieces they would like to store on site)? Is there a space that could be used as a change room, or will performers be changing in the washroom? And, to ask the money question again, do these additional spaces involve additional charges to the renters?

Would you give a renter group a key to your building, or would you need to have a staff member or volunteer on site while they are rehearsing?

### ***Speaking of Money***

In a healthy church, a committee would bring a fee structure to the church board for a decision, taking all the above into account. Some, both within and outside the church, will feel it would be grand to simply open the doors and coordinate the bookings. While it is true that most community arts groups are far from rich, most will not assume free space, but build rentals for performance and rehearsals into their own budgets. It will be up to your board to wrestle with what is a fair price in your particular community for the spaces you can offer, taking into consideration the additional work for staff and volunteers and the additional wear and tear on the building. Consult with neighbouring churches on what they are charging, and what informs those rates. You support your staff by having fees in place, and indicating clearly when to refer requests for discounts or free space to the board (and how long such a request may wait for an answer).

You may want to create a fee schedule based on the type of usage. Other things can go on in a church building during a rehearsal; in most churches, noise bleed would indicate that nothing else can go on during a recording – thus, a recording session should have a higher fee than an event where the other user-groups may go about their business. One church with a large physical plant offers four different rates:

- (1) special events (performances/entertainment, craft shows, large meetings,
- (2) neighbourhood programs (classes, workshops, auditions),

- (3) peace or social justice (education, solidarity meetings) and
- (4) arts rehearsals.

This kind of clarity is a help to church staff/volunteers and renters alike. The clearer the church can be about what is included for the rental dollar (including opening time and exiting time), the better the relationship between church and arts/community groups will be.

### ***Wild Treasure***

“In the house of the righteous, there is much treasure.” (Proverbs 15:6) And the house of God, as we sometimes call our church buildings, surely is treasure. But like all other kinds of treasure, our buildings come with the dilemma of stewardship. Can we safeguard our treasured spaces for future generations and, at the same time, offer these treasured spaces for the use of the community? What do we risk if we let in the wild things – the cellist whose endpin leaves a pockmark in the chancel floor, the heat loss when doors are open in the bleak midwinter for the delivery of risers, finding an empty vodka bottle in the balcony the morning after a rock concert? Do our buildings have their own ministries to the wider community, particularly as places for the arts? Or is our primary responsibility to those who wish the sanctuary to be only a place of worship? Jesus urges his followers to cannily count the cost – “Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost?” But his teaching ends with the deep stewardship challenge we continue to wrestle with some 2,000 years later: “...none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Luke 14: 25-33). James warns against hoarding: “Your riches have rotted...your gold and silver have rusted and their rust will be evidence against you...” (James 5: 2-3). Yet there is much in scripture to celebrate and honour the sanctuary as sacred space. Psalm 84 begins “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!” I Kings 6 describes Solomon’s Temple in luxurious detail, and God appears happy with the project (I Kings 9:1-10). But the story is ambivalent whether the Temple was a monument to God alone, or also to the glory of King

Solomon. So, too, are our sanctuaries places set apart to encounter the divine, or places set apart for people just like us? What do we do with the amazing treasure we have in our buildings?

## ***THE CHURCH IN THE WILD WOOD QUESTIONS***

If you were to rent your home or sublet your apartment, what agreements would you want with the renter? How would this compare to the “Devil in the Details” for renting space in a church? How are those two kinds of rental similar? Different?

In the story of the Christmas musical, the author took down the cross in the sanctuary to make space for the play. What symbols in your church would you agree to move to offer hospitality for an arts event? Are there some symbols you would NOT want to move? In the Christmas musical story, who should have been consulted about taking down the cross, and what communication with the congregation would have been helpful?

What spaces hold your congregation’s treasure chest of memories? Is the place of the treasure chest only the sanctuary, or are there some other sites in the church building that are equally precious and guarded? Are there areas of the building that some groups within the church feel ownership of: the kitchen, the choir room, the Sunday school storage area, the nursery? What happens when others use these spaces?

How is the use of space a question of stewardship? A question of preservation for future generations? Is there something that needs to be preserved or saved...or, is it better to give it generously? Is there a way to do both?

## A Prayer to Close this book, A Prayer to open a way

In our scripture's Apocrypha (the books that are "also rans" and didn't make it into the Bible), comes this wisdom from Sirach, praising the artists as those who maintain the fabric of the world:

### Scripture: Sirach 38:24-34

<sup>24</sup>The wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure;  
only the one who has little business can become wise.

<sup>25</sup>How can one become wise who handles the plow,  
and who glories in the shaft of a goad,  
who drives oxen and is occupied with their work,  
and whose talk is about bulls?

<sup>26</sup>He sets his heart on plowing furrows,  
and he is careful about fodder for the heifers.

<sup>27</sup>So it is with every artisan and master artisan  
who labors by night as well as by day;  
those who cut the signets of seals,  
each is diligent in making a great variety;  
they set their heart on painting a lifelike image,  
and they are careful to finish their work.

<sup>28</sup>So it is with the smith, sitting by the anvil,  
intent on his iron-work;  
the breath of the fire melts his flesh,  
and he struggles with the heat of the furnace;  
the sound of the hammer deafens his ears,<sup>[a]</sup>  
and his eyes are on the pattern of the object.  
He sets his heart on finishing his handiwork,  
and he is careful to complete its decoration.

<sup>29</sup>So it is with the potter sitting at his work  
and turning the wheel with his feet;  
he is always deeply concerned over his products,  
and he produces them in quantity.

<sup>30</sup>He molds the clay with his arm  
and makes it pliable with his feet;  
he sets his heart to finish the glazing,  
and he takes care in firing<sup>[b]</sup> the kiln.

<sup>31</sup>All these rely on their hands,  
and all are skillful in their own work.

<sup>32</sup>Without them no city can be inhabited,  
and wherever they live, they will not go hungry.<sup>[c]</sup>

Yet they are not sought out for the council of the people,<sup>[d]</sup>

<sup>33</sup>nor do they attain eminence in the public assembly.

They do not sit in the judge's seat,  
nor do they understand the decisions of the courts;  
they cannot expound discipline or judgment,  
and they are not found among the rulers.<sup>[e]</sup>



<sup>34</sup>But they maintain the fabric of the world,  
and their concern is for<sup>1</sup> the exercise of their trade.

**Prayer:**

You who invite wonder, O God,  
You speak to us in your word and in the marginal word  
– in the word that stands outside the word,  
the mendicant word that searches for hospitality,  
yet a word that maintains the fabric of this unravelled world,  
mending.

Open the doors of our hearts, O Maker and Mender:  
Sanctuaries, be open!  
Welcome the dancer<sup>1</sup> with blood in his shoes and muscle inflamed,  
incarnate the vision, make dreams flesh!

Welcome to Sunday morning the arts of Saturday night:  
Saying it with a sax, and such a lot to say, shivering in rags and screaming through the horn,  
*Do you love me? do you love me? do you love me? do you love me? do you love*  
The phrase unbearably, endlessly, variously repeated  
Until in our faces, even the ruined and most dull,  
A curious, wary light appears.<sup>2</sup>

Open the doors of our hearts, O Maker and Mender:  
Sanctuaries, be open!  
Welcome the mad muddy mess of the potter,  
Besplattered and intent,  
Creating by turn, turn, turning,  
Forming as we were formed, from the dust of the ground,  
Turning in risk of spoiling in the potter's hand<sup>3</sup>.  
Fail better.  
Begin again.

Open the doors of our hearts, O Maker and Mender:  
Sanctuaries, be open!  
Stir our hearts, stir our eyes.  
Welcome those who bear colours – blue or purple or crimson or silver or bronze,  
Welcome skilful women who spin with their hands<sup>4</sup>, hearts moved, moving us  
Into a new country, a new kin-dom.

Open the doors of our hearts, O Maker and Mender:  
Sanctuaries, be open!  
Actors come, deliver a reality more real in this open space.

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 150, 2 Samuel 6:14, 1 Samuel 10: 5-6

<sup>2</sup> James Baldwin, *Another Country*

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 18

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 35: 20f

make the invisible visible, give us glimpses.  
Like the Palm Sunday agitprop parade,  
show us a world with tables turned,  
where swords become ploughshares.  
Play your parts well, we pray,  
astonish us  
that we might know again.

Open the doors of our hearts, O Maker and Mender:  
Sanctuaries, be open!  
Open us to those who labour night and day,  
those who set their hearts, intent, struggle, careful, molding, firing, dreaming, changing  
changing us,  
maintaining the fabric of the world, mending the world,  
giving us glimpses in our holy places.  
You invite us into wonder, O God.  
May we wonder, and see a new world.  
Amen.

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