

Living Faith Story

James Bay United Church, planted from the seeds of a Methodist Sunday School, has been a spiritual home for people in the neighbourhood and beyond for nearly 130 years. Throughout this time the vitality of the congregation has ebbed and flowed. Just when the church was on the verge of closing, there was a great surge of life in the late 1960's to mid 70's, a time of extra-ordinary contribution to the well-being of the neighbourhood. The minister at the time, Ken Wood, shared a particular passion for connecting with the surrounding community. An Action Committee was formed to listen to people in the neighbourhood and discover their pressing needs and desires. From there, in remarkable short order, there was the birth of the James Bay Community Association, the James Bay New Horizons Centre, the James Bay Community Project and Wellness Centre, the James Bay Beacon monthly newspaper --all developed through the work of the Action Committee in conjunction with partners in the neighbourhood. When asked where did all the energy come from, to make so much happen in such a short time? Marion Woods, one of the movers and shakers of the congregation said, "I've been asked many times to try and explain how it happened. I can say first that it takes a lot of love and caring. In our instance this comes from our love of God as we know him in Jesus Christ. Secondly, one must be ready to listen and follow the lead of the Holy Spirit as one hears and recognizes it in others. ... All I can say is that we were caught up in a movement that simply flowed and there was no stopping it." In the same way, Beckley Farm Lodge (seniors' care center), the Association for Street Kids, and the James Bay United Church Thrift Shop came into being.

While that particular period in our history stands out for the visible marks made in the neighbourhood, all along there has been a core of people who have "tended the fire," doing their part in sustaining a gathering place for people to deepen their life with God and grow in their care for the world.

Early into this century it seemed the end of this congregation's life was in sight, with a reduction in staff time, the dwindling of leadership capacity, fewer and fewer people with the energy and resources for undertaking and sustaining various ministries. In 2011 the Board made a decision to commit to a 2 year period in which to taste and see if renewal might be possible. Now, eight years later, looking back, we can see how the Spirit's impetus for new and renewed life has been at work among us...

In the evolution of our Sunday morning worship practice

In the transformation of our Thrift Shop ministry, now known for its currencies of grace-filled encounter and fun

In the re-orienting of our Tuesday Morning Drop-in ministry that meets a hunger for life-giving community as much as a hunger for food

In the tending of our physical premises, creating spaces of welcome and beauty

In the restructuring of our Board, with a focus on discerning priorities and a readiness for risk-taking

In the way people wander into our company, find life there and become part of the scene

In our partnering with neighbours to sponsor refugees

In our deliberate turning outward, to connect more widely in our neighbourhood

In our boldness in being present as the church in neighbourhood initiatives;

In developing and offering new opportunities for spiritual / soulful connection for people within and beyond the congregation

In communicating (inviting, informing, connecting, listening) more deliberately and widely through social media, signage, personal conversation

In our Pentecost celebration this year (2019) this is how members of our congregation described the sense of Love's power at work in and through the life of our church:

In the experience of healing, acceptance, belonging, forgiveness, in generosity extended, in inclusion and embrace

In feeling the call to support and care for one another

In sensing a safe place for our stories

In worship, through music, through contemplative spaces that nourish spirits and enable us to move into action

In the experience of being challenged and strengthened to live well and boldly, with care and compassion for ourselves, others and the planet

In the desire to gather regularly to connect with one another and grow in love

In the desire to deepen our relationships within and beyond our congregation

In the life-giving quality of connection we share with our neighbours through the Thrift Shop, Tuesday Morning Drop-in, Tuesday Night Jazz, Epiphany Labyrinth walk

In the experience of Love -- that Love is real and transforming, is the energy that enables and sustains all life

In the impetus to share the goodness we have experienced (the peace, love, kindness, acceptance, encouragement, strengthening, deepening, inspiration, friendship, healing, generosity) beyond ourselves

Through it all, we are sensing it is our purpose to be a living expression of the Beloved Community, in which the welcome is wide, the receiving and giving of care is palpable, and through which the Love that meets and deepens and enlivens us, propels us outward in the service of life, in the sharing of Life.

Two years ago, we made a decision to go further in our priority of deepening our connections in the neighbourhood. While significant connections were being made through our Thrift Shop and Tuesday Morning Drop-in ministries, it seemed more was not only possible but called for. Toward that end, and with the help of a Pro-vision Fund grant, we launched a two year Communication and Neighbourhood Engagement Initiative for which we hired Gordon Miller to help us imagine and experience the possibilities. In these two years we have stepped out in ways we would not have otherwise, and in ways that have made a difference to others and to ourselves. We have become known in the neighbourhood for our generosity, our welcome, our care and creativity. We have become known as a supportive partner in the building up and well-being of the neighbourhood. We have found allies and have been found to be an ally (eg. in beautifying the neighbourhood; in fostering healthy, caring community; in making space and creating opportunities for growth, for healing).

We recognize that the progress we have made in these two years is in large part because of the staff time we have dedicated to this priority. We also recognize that more than simply a priority, the work of intentional engagement with people in the neighbourhood is shifting our way of being the Church. Hence our decision to establish an on-going staff position that helps us cultivate this shift, and grow in our capacity to be an agent of God's transforming love.