

NORTH

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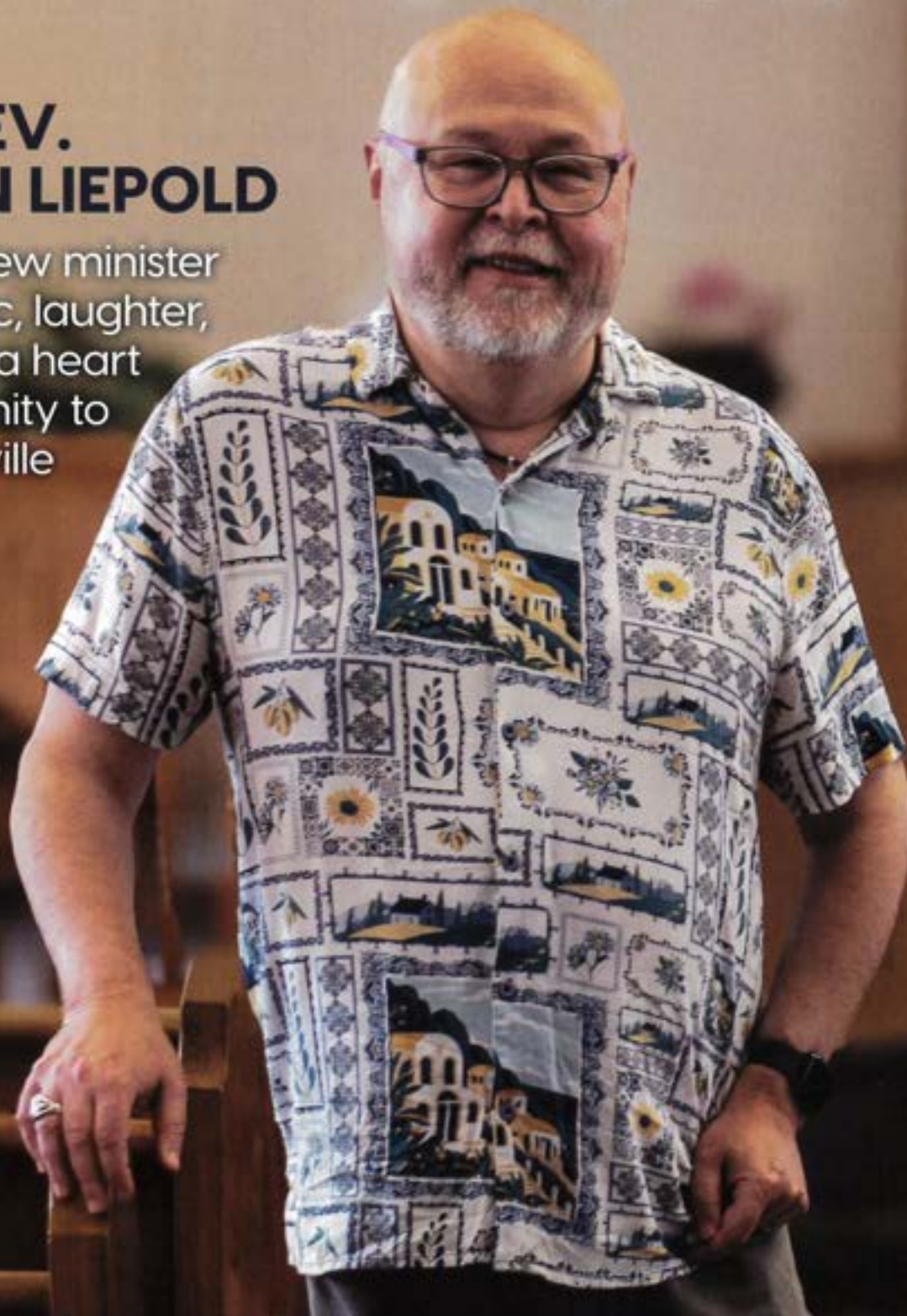
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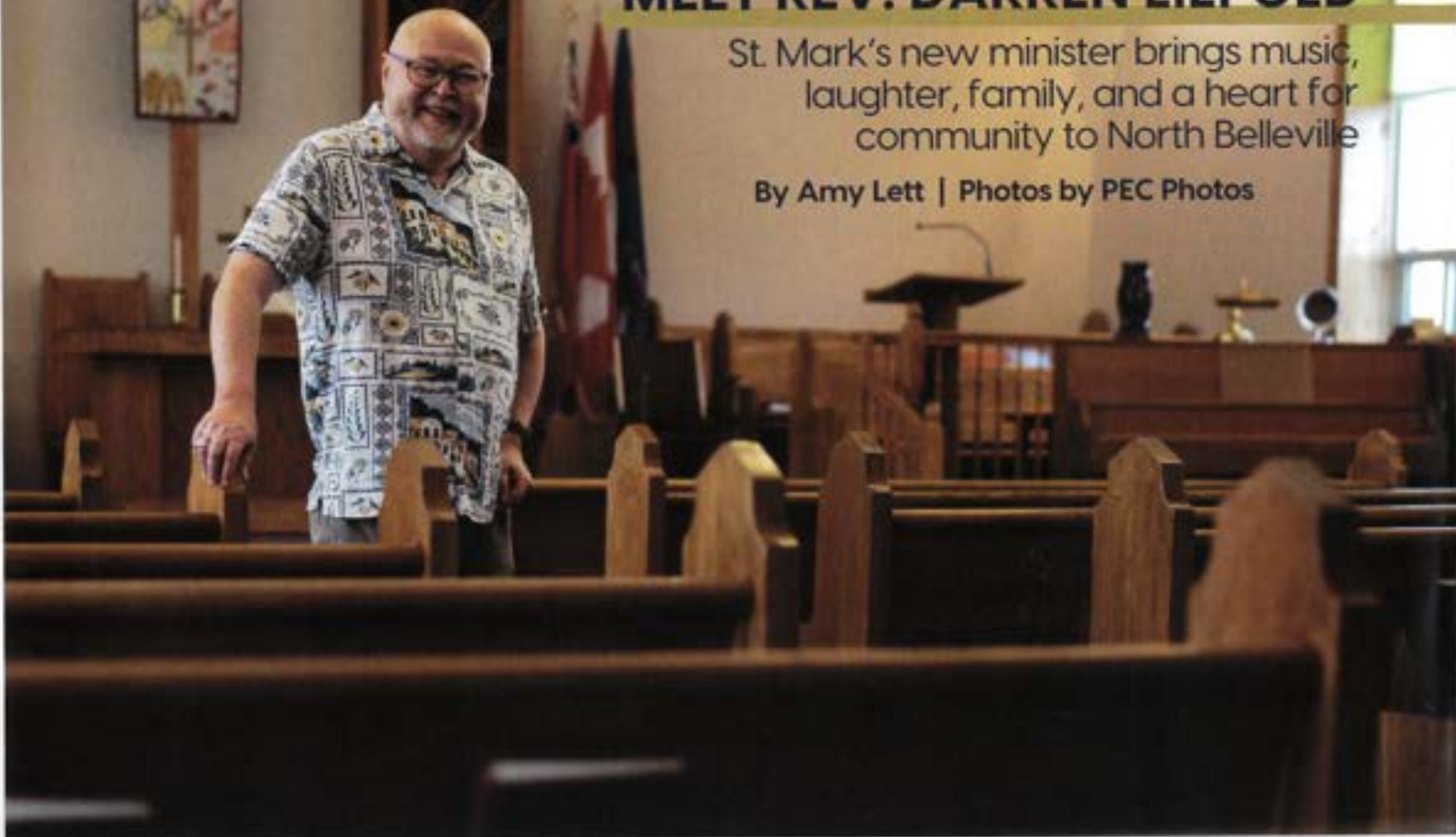


Your Community. Your Connection. Your Belleville.

MEET REV. DARREN LIEPOLD

St. Mark's new minister brings music, laughter, family, and a heart for community to North Belleville

By Amy Lett | Photos by PEC Photos



Before many North Belleville neighbours come to know Rev. Darren Liepold through his new role at St. Mark's United Church, it may be easier to picture him in a more ordinary and familiar setting: gathered around a dinner table with his partner, Brian, a few friends, good food, lively conversation, and, if the evening goes the way many of their evenings do, music.

Over the years, Darren and Brian have loved opening their home to friends, especially at Christmas, when the gathering often included a big meal, hymn books passed around, and voices joining together in carols. It is the kind of tradition that says a great deal about a household: generous, musical, a little nostalgic, and full of room for laughter. Even Bella, their Border Collie and Pointer cross, had a part to play. Their much-loved dog would howl along as everyone sang, and according to Darren, she even managed to hit the right notes from time to time. At the centre of many of those gatherings was Brian's cooking. He is especially known for roasted potatoes and Yorkshire pudding, the sort of comfort food that belongs on a table where people are meant to settle in, talk longer than planned, and feel at home.

For Darren and Brian, evenings like these say something about the life they have built together over nearly 34 years. Their home life is rooted in the things that make people feel at ease: food, laughter, conversation, music, and the pleasure of gathering with people they care about. Brian, who is also a United Church minister and serves in Picton, is known as a wonderful cook. Darren is a trained operatic tenor with a love of music, theatre, photography, and travel. Together, they enjoy quiet walks by the

water, British comedies and dramas, politics, current events, and time spent with friends. Family has been at the centre of that life as well. Darren and Brian's son now lives in Toronto, where he works as a drywall. While Darren's new role at St. Mark's may be what brings this story to North Belleville Living, the fuller introduction is to someone arriving with a rich life already behind him: a partner, a father, a musician, a storyteller, and a neighbour beginning to find his place in a community he has come to admire.

Finding Their Way to Belleville

Darren and Brian first began getting to know the Belleville area four years ago, when Brian accepted his appointment at Picton United Church. At first, it was the natural beauty of the region that made an impression: the water, the beaches, the County, the Bay of Quinte, and the sense of openness that is easy to appreciate after years spent in larger cities.

Darren remembers their first fall here especially clearly. The colours, the Bay of Quinte, and the different waterways all made the area feel spectacular in that quiet, unmistakable way this region has of showing itself off. There was beauty in every direction, but also something deeply livable about it.

"It's small, but there is everything here," he says. "You can find anything you want here in the Belleville area."

That balance became part of the appeal. Belleville had many of the amenities of a larger centre, but without the constant congestion and traffic that often come with big-city life. Toronto,



Ottawa, and Montreal remained close enough for a trip, but day-to-day life here felt more manageable, more grounded, and more connected to the landscape around it.

For Darren, the city also began to open through music. Over the past two years, he has been a member of the Belleville Choral Society, an experience that helped him become more familiar with the people, culture, and creative life of the community.

As he and Brian spent more time here, they began collecting the kinds of local favourites that make a place feel personal. Darren mentions Reid's Dairy milkshakes, karaoke nights at The Beaufort, good Italian, Greek, and Eastern European food in town, and the hope of getting to a Belleville Senators game sometime soon. They are small details, but meaningful ones. They are the early markers of belonging: the places you return to, the experiences you mention to others, and the rhythms that slowly make a community feel like part of your own life.

A Life Shaped by Community

Darren brings to St. Mark's a long and varied life in ministry, though he speaks about that experience less like a résumé and more like a collection of communities that have shaped him. He has been ordained for 36 years and has served in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. He also spent four years working with the Uniting Church in Sydney, Australia, an experience he describes as "quite magical."

There were parts of life and ministry in Australia that felt surprisingly familiar. People, Darren found, were much the same. The meetings were much the same too, he jokes — just with a different accent.

But the experience also offered perspective. Moving across the world required openness, curiosity, and a willingness to meet people where they were. If you are willing to put yourself out there, Darren says, people are often willing to welcome you. That lesson has stayed with him.

Having lived and served in many places, Darren understands that every community has its own character. You do not truly become part of a place by arriving with all the answers. You begin by listening, noticing, joining in, and allowing relationships to form over time.

That outlook matters as he steps into this new role in North Belleville. Though he had not yet officially started at St. Mark's

at the time of our conversation, the meetings and events he had attended had already given him a strong sense of welcome. For Darren, that kind of beginning matters. It is one thing to arrive in a new role. It is another to feel the first signs of belonging.

A Place of Welcome

The congregation has described itself as "a beacon of light, a beacon of love," and Darren sees that not as a slogan, but as a practical responsibility.

Many people are struggling right now, he says. Rising costs, changing job markets, housing pressures, inflation, and uncertainty have made life difficult for families and individuals. At the same time, even in a world where people can connect instantly through technology, many remain lonely.

"We cocooned during COVID," Darren says, "and I think many of us are still trying to break out of that shell."

That is why places of welcome matter. For Darren, welcome is not simply about opening the door and hoping people walk through it. It is about listening to people's stories, understanding their experiences, and helping them find points of connection with others.

He also recognizes that walking into a church, or any established community, for the first time can feel intimidating. Some people arrive with deep faith. Others arrive with questions. Some may feel certain about what they believe, while others may simply be looking for connection, friendship, or a place where they feel accepted. To Darren, the welcome must be wide enough for all of them.

At St. Mark's, he says, people are





accepted as they are. The congregation includes people from many walks of life, with different experiences, different backgrounds, and different stories. Some live and work in Belleville, while others are connected to surrounding communities, including Tyendinaga. That variety is part of what makes the welcome meaningful. For anyone who may feel nervous about walking through the doors for the first time, Darren's message is simple: come as you are. "No one is turned away," he says. "Everyone is celebrated for the gifts they bring."

Part of the Good

As North Belleville continues to grow and change, Darren sees both real need and real possibility. St. Mark's cannot meet

every need on its own, and he is clear that no single church, agency, organization, or community group can. But he believes that when people and organizations work together, much more becomes possible. That means churches cooperating with agencies, community groups supporting one another, neighbours paying attention to what is needed, and people being willing to show up where they can.

"St. Mark's needs to continue in its work by cooperating with other churches, other social agencies, other interest groups to make Belleville a wonderful place," he says.

Darren hopes to become involved in community activities and to show, through action and presence, how much he cares about the wider good of Belleville.

"I hope to get involved with many of the activities in the community to show we care and we are a part of the good for all," he says.

A New Chapter

For North Belleville readers, Darren's story is not only about a new minister beginning at St. Mark's. It is also about Darren and Brian becoming part of the life of this community in the ordinary, meaningful ways people do: through music, meals, local discoveries, conversations, friendships, and a willingness to show up. They arrive with a deep appreciation for community, shaped by years of serving, moving, listening, and beginning again. They also arrive with a sense of excitement about Belleville and about St. Mark's role within it.

"The opportunity to enter into a well-established community that is looking to be a positive presence in the world is quite exciting," Darren says.

In many ways, that is the heart of this new chapter. St. Mark's may be the doorway through which Darren and Brian are becoming better known in North Belleville, but the story is ultimately a neighbourly one. It is about two people who value laughter, music, food, conversation, and welcome. It is about a congregation looking outward. And it is about the steady work of helping people feel they belong.

For Darren and Brian, this new chapter begins with curiosity, gratitude, and a genuine desire to be part of the community around them.

For North Belleville, it is a chance to welcome new neighbours who seem ready to do what good neighbours do: take part, listen well, and make room at the table.

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