

175 years at Dundas Centre: Community Outreach

The recent article by Bob Csernyik in *Broadview* [June 2021, Vol. 3(1):54-57] entitled "Community Centres, The Vital Relationship between Churches and Non-profits," reminded us of the long history that Dundas Street Centre United Church (DSCUC) has had in reaching out to the community. DSCUC has been a mission-oriented church since its beginning 175 years ago. The people of this church have always expressed a strong desire to reach out to each other, to people in the London community, to people across Canada, and to people overseas. Over the years, this outreach has taken many forms: spiritual services, social and health services, and cultural services. All are aimed at the spiritual, mental and physical wellness of the community. The building is a beehive of activity on week days, some days being even busier than Sunday!

The *Broadview* article describes how Toronto's St. Matthew's United Church in pre-pandemic times was a "busy community hub" 10-13 hours a day throughout the week in its partnership with non-profit agencies. The workers in this century-old building were not necessarily church members. Nevertheless, they volunteered tirelessly, together with church members, to provide nursery school space, to feed the homeless, to sponsor the life and worship of Eritrean immigrants and to sponsor cultural events. Doesn't this sound familiar? As in our case, the church building provides affordable space for personal and community wellness missions that are aligned with those of the church. At the same time, these partnerships allow all parties to become invested in the church's sustainability and vitality.

In support of congregational wellness

As we look back at the history of DSCUC, we see many examples of how members of this church have reached out to each other. From its early beginnings in the mid1800s, the church was an important social and spiritual hub for those living in the area. Many



'June in January' Choir Show 1999. (Photo source unknown)

projects undertaken by the church's societies and clubs were aimed at the women, men and youth of the congregation itself. Some of the groups included the Ladies Aid Society (1910) which later became the Women's Association, the Young Men's Club for soldiers in training (1914), the Red Cross Workers (1937), the Dundas Centre Basketball Team which was part of a City Church League (1942), "Dundas Doubles" for young married couples (1949), the "Young Adult Fellowship" (1952), the Hi C's Youth Group (1960) for children 12-15 years of age and the Young People's Group for teens 15 years and older. In 1962, the Women's Association and the Women's Missionary Society amalgamated (nationally) to form the United Church Women (UCW). In addition to social events such as the Hot Potato Bash (1997) and bus trips to local theatres (2000), UCW fundraisers supported many construction, renovation and redecoration projects for the building: Memorial Chapel, the Sanctuary, kitchen, parlour, and the new choir room (S7), to name a few. Other social clubs fostered congregational wellness, education and fellowship. Examples include the Men's (breakfast) Club (1964), the "Friendship Club" (1967), "Afternoon Out" (1971) for young mothers in the congregation, Refugee Host Group (1987), "Focus Groups" (1980)(evening discussions), "Sunday Afternoon Discussion Group" (1997), choir musical events, "Friends United" (1998) which organized social events such as chili dinners, line-dancing, and nature walks, the "Gender Study Group and Encounters" (2001-2005) to discuss homosexuality and faith issues in the United Church, and the Book Club (2007- 2010). The discussion groups were eventually replaced by talks on a wide range of subjects at congregational breakfasts and light lunches organized by the Outreach and Social Justice Committee (2016).

In support of the wellness of local, national and international communities

DSCUC has contributed faithfully to the financing of Mission and Services projects of the United Church of Canada through personal donations and various fundraisers.

During the two World Wars, church knitters, the Red Cross Workers, the Men's Club and the Women's Association were kept busy packing boxes for soldiers overseas. In 1964 the Men's Club started supporting orphans in Hong Kong and began the famous **"Paper Rollers."** **Fred Faas** faithfully led this activity on two Saturday mornings a month for many years. He kept volunteers happy by providing coffee and his delicious coffee cakes. Sadly, the group had to disband in 2018 because an outlet could not be found for the rolls of newspaper produced.

DSCUC folks were attuned to the needs of Canadian families affected by the "Depression" of the 1930s. "Cent-a-Meal" boxes, donated by congregation families, were used to help needy families in London and in Western Canada. In the 1950s, the **"Good Samaritan Cupboard"** was created to collect, refurbish and distribute clothes and household items for the needy in London. In the 1970s this activity occurred in the old Sunday School rooms above the Sunday School Auditorium. In the 1990s, Good Sam was relocated to the church basement. These busy, Monday-morning workers, including both non-church volunteers and church members, continue to fill orders placed with the church office by a wide variety of social agencies in London.

Over the years, there have been many help-groups formed to reach out to needy London families. In 1962, the "In as Much" box was set out in the church Narthex on Sundays to collect loose change for the "Daily Bread" program at St. Paul's Anglican Church. In the 1990s, a basket was set out to collect dried and canned goods for this same local

program. In 1981, Sister Elizabeth Sexton was hired part-time to operate a "Coffee House" in the basement of DSCUC for ex-psychiatric patients. This project was disbanded in 1991. In 1992, the UCW began preparing meals for clients helped by the London Aids Committee. In 2001, the Outreach and Social Justice Committee set up a "Re-integration Project" to assist people recently released from prison. In 2019, that Committee also established a "Hamper Program," in collaboration with the Mennonite Central Committee, to collect household necessities for ex-prisoners returning to the community. This project has morphed into one supporting "The Caring Cupboard," a program set up by residents of 30 Baseline Road (a community housing residence for seniors) to help those residents who struggle to survive on very limited funds.

Since 1987, DSCUC has been one of 11 churches in the **London Inner City Faith Team (LIFT)** which co-ordinates efforts to address social needs and to help the disadvantaged in downtown London. **Fred Faas** has been a faithful member of the LIFT Council. In 1990, the LIFT Council got approval to build 13 subsidized rental apartments on Queens Avenue to assist in the housing problem.

Feeding the needy has always occupied the minds of DSCUC congregants. In 1996, discussions began with First St Andrew's United Church as to how we could follow the example of Toronto in setting up a church-coordinated **"Out-of-the-Cold" (OOTC) Program** to help the poor and homeless in downtown London. By 1997, an OOTC Daily Meal project had been set up at seven church sites. Our meal was offered on Wednesday nights in collaboration with Bishop Cronyn Anglican Church. Since 1998, **Fred Faas** has been the coordinator (Captain) for three teams (four teams since 2005), each with its own Chef to prepare and serve a hot evening meal (chili, hearty soup or casserole). In the beginning, the meals were served in the gymnasium; in 2011 they were moved to the Sunday School Auditorium. This highly successful meal program serves 100s of hungry people a year between fall and spring. It involves our own members as well as many outside volunteers and is generously supported by other churches, non-profit agencies, industries and private individuals in London.

Getting back to the church/non-profit collaboration as "community hubs" described in the *Broadview* article which sparked this historical review, we cannot close without recalling the relationships that DSCUC has had with non-profit recovery agencies and with child care services. DSCUC continues to interact closely with staff and clients at Quintin Warner House at the corner of Queens and Maitland. This residence for men recovering from alcohol and drug addiction is operated by Mission Services of London. In exchange for meeting room space and use of the gymnasium for recreation, Quintin Warner men help with shoveling snow, cutting the grass and other jobs at the church. Since the mid-1990s, DSCUC ministers have been helping their staff with "Faith for Living," a weekly discussion group. Also, we have provided, at nominal cost, rental space for Alcoholics Anonymous, Westover and other recovery groups. From 1987 to 2006, we rented nursery and day care space in Shambleau Hall (former Sunday School rooms): initially to Kiddieland Day Nursery, then to Chelsea Green and finally to Infant Day Care.



Quintin Warner volunteers **Darryl** and **Alazar** helping **Lavarre Clark** and **Judith Pickering** with the 2018 DSCUC Potato Bash meal (Photo from June 2018 *Centre Spoke*)

As the saying goes, **we don't appreciate what we have until we no longer have it.** The COVID-19 pandemic of the past year has deprived us of so much. We can review our past at DSCUC and be both satisfied and proud of what we have done to reach out to each other and to the community. But, we are never done. We see the need now, right outside our empty church. We hear the cries for help. We pray that the COVID restrictions will soon be loosened so that we can, once again, reach out directly to each other and to the community...to be again that "Community Hub".

Jim Traquair and Diane Cuppels

