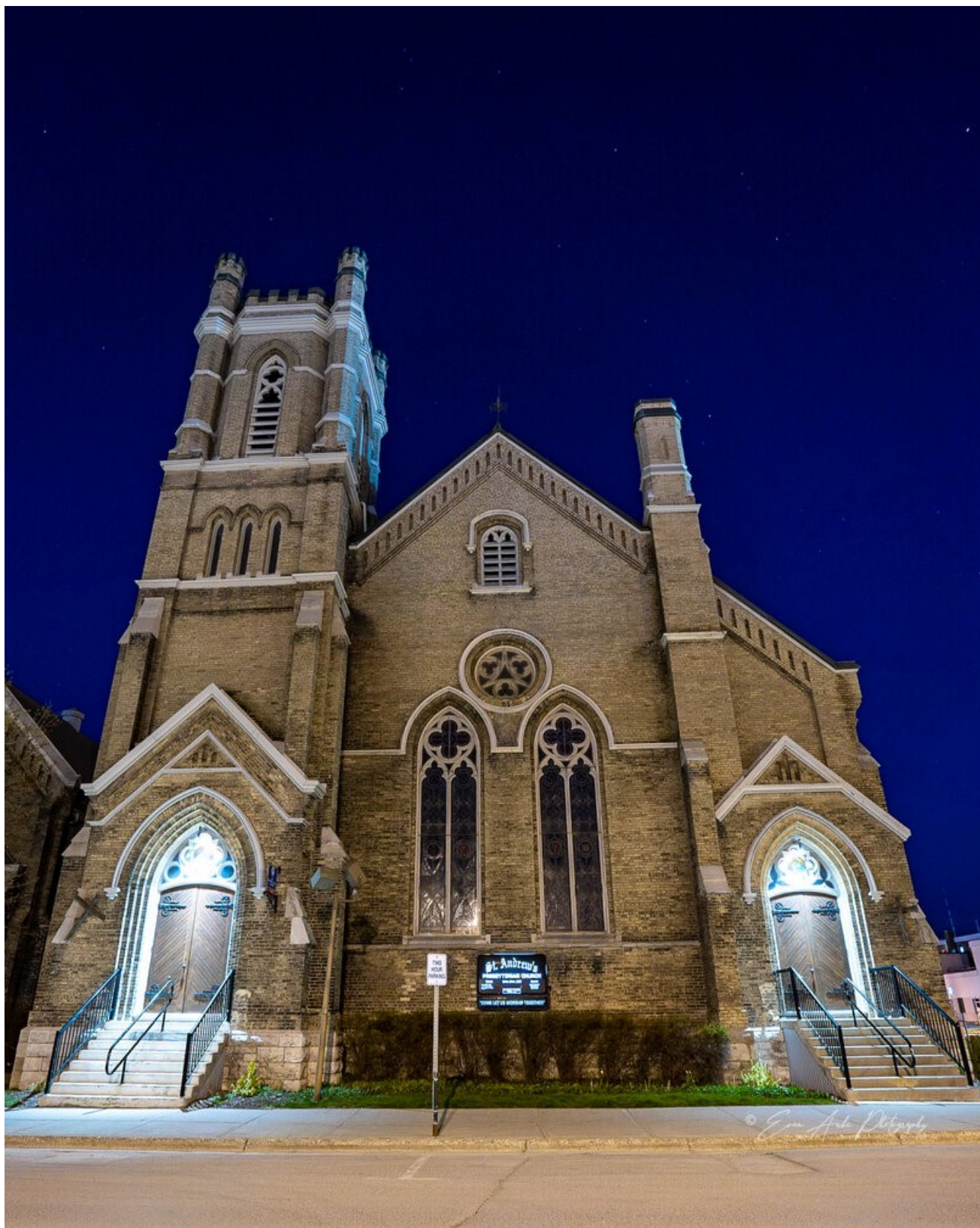


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GO TO
TOP



St. Andrew's developed a boxed lunch ministry for those who are ordinarily served by its Community Soup Kitchen. Photo: Evan Aube.

GO TO
TOP

Places of worship: Keeping the faith during COVID-19

Published on September 1, 2020 — in Around Town/Community/Seniors — by Ian McKechnie

Most of us first knew something significant was upon us on March 12 this year when Ontario's schools were shuttered. For those who belong to communities of faith, the pandemic didn't really hit home until a few days later, on the morning of March 15 – a Sunday.

When places of worship closed, it was generally assumed that this would be, at most, a temporary hiatus. Like those who hoped against hope that the First World War would be over by Christmas of 1914, Lindsay's churchgoers thought that they would be back in their meeting places by at least Easter. Alas, the most important festival in the Christian year came and went, with the "Alleluias!" of Easter being confined to private homes.



CAMBRIDGE STREET UNITED CHURCH.

Father Balonwu Opke, senior pastor at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, recalls the confusion and panic which rattled his congregation as mandatory closures were rolled out.

"We had to field a lot of phone calls with questions about what parishioners were to do in the absence of the Sunday liturgy," he says. "There were a few who were not too pleased with the closure."

Yet, as they have through generations of persecution, schism, reformation, war, economic depression, and much more, the churches stepped up to the challenge of having to do things a little differently.

"Going to Church" During COVID-19

GO TO
TOP

Some churches, notably Fairview Baptist and Cambridge Street United, already had long-established livestream capabilities, and so the switch to “virtual” services was fairly seamless. Other churches had been recording sermons and shifted to recording entire services with only the absolute minimum number of participants in attendance.

Still others jettisoned the trappings of a traditional sanctuary, save for perhaps the minister prerecording their homily in a pulpit. Readings are conducted by laypeople on back decks, in gardens, and by the lakeside. At St. Andrew’s, these are submitted to the church and integrated into a full service complete with pre-recorded choral music and inspiring drone footage of Kawartha Lakes.

So far, so good. However, as people of faith will attest, corporate worship involves more than just reading, preaching, and singing. Many of the most important rituals practised in these spaces include a great deal of physical interaction. For example, the logistics of Holy Communion – the meal at which many Christians believe they are nourished by Jesus himself – had to be worked out. Anglicans temporarily suspended the celebration, making the case that the meal reaches its fullest meaning only when the whole community is gathered in person.

Presbyterians took a different approach, relying on guidelines from their General Assembly which in 2012 allowed churches to celebrate Holy Communion virtually when meeting in person is impractical. Parishioners gathered around their own tables provide their own bread and wine or

grape juice, and the celebrant consecrates them from afar.

For the leader of one mainline denomination, definitions of community, place, and space are being radically widened or redefined because of COVID-19.

“I think that the pandemic quickly reminded us that ‘church’ must be more than the buildings in which we gather to worship, serve, and share fellowship,” observes the Rev. Amanda Currie, moderator of the 145th general assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

“When we do return to our usual worship spaces, I hope that we will hold a little less tightly to the buildings, knowing that they are there to equip us for the work of ministry, but they are not equivalent with ministry itself.”

(With this year’s general assembly cancelled, Currie is making history in becoming the first Moderator to serve in the role for two years rather than the customary one.)

Serving One Another During A Pandemic

For communities of faith, devotional life extends well beyond the sanctuary. With public health restrictions preventing gatherings en masse, and with the same restrictions deeply affecting personal finances, religious organizations have had to find ways to facilitate ongoing fellowship among their members and maintain their ministry of serving the less fortunate.

Since about mid-April, parishioners from St. Andrew’s have enjoyed a virtual

coffee
**GO TO
TOP**

social on Sunday morning via ZOOM in lieu of an after-church gathering. Rev. Dr. Warren Leibovitch, rector of St. Paul's, has been hosting a Wednesday morning virtual "coffee break," also via ZOOM, which is attended by up to a dozen people. Meetings among clergy and laity have also shifted to ZOOM over the last few months.

While technology like ZOOM and FaceTime has opened many doors for local churches, it has its limits – particularly for older congregations in rural areas.



"Our membership is encouraged to telephone members of this [vulnerable] sector in particular regularly to check in and keep connected," says Kerri Jebson, chair of the council for United Community Ministry (a group of six United Churches spread across western Kawartha Lakes and Brock County). "With varying qualities of (rural) internet access, it can be somewhat problematic to participate, or to communicate clearly," Jebson says.

Among the first questions asked by the churches during the pandemic was "how can we continue to serve our neighbour?"

St. Andrew's developed a boxed lunch

ministry for those who are ordinarily served by its Community Soup Kitchen and Sunday Suppers. Down the street, meanwhile, the Lindsay Salvation Army Community Church re-engineered its food bank program, suspending the use of shopping carts and requesting that clients place their orders ahead of time and make appointments to pick up their items.

Economic hardship has driven numbers of food bank users up across Canada, says Lt. Susan Roffel, who with her husband Lt. Bob Roffel, was only recently posted to Lindsay. People who worked in the service industries were hit hard by the economic shutdown and many found themselves making use of the Salvation Army's food banks, Roffel observes.

As a result of this ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the Canadian economy, many have been calling on the federal government to institute a guaranteed basic income. Among those who have penned letters on behalf of their denominations to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is the Currie, the Presbyterian moderator.

"Had a guaranteed basic income been in place before the COVID-19 pandemic hit," Currie wrote on May 12, "we would not be seeing nearly the same level of drastic and alarming economic repercussions, and the fear that many will not be able to make rent or afford to eat, that businesses will close, causing cascading unemployment that further contributes to economic chaos."

Making A Comeback

When will places of worship return to some semblance of "normal?"

**GO TO
TOP**

It varies.

Some places of worship reopened in late July, once they were given the green light to do so by provincial health authorities. John Boyachek, the pastor of Fairview Baptist Church, reports that he had about 95 people between two Sunday services when the church reopened.

For three weeks prior, he had been “preaching to cars” at a weekly drive-in service. Still, Boyachek concedes that people are nervous and expects that a full “return to normal” is still some time away.

Roman Catholics have been permitted in their churches for over a month now, and the diocese of Peterborough has prepared a helpful video on how to worship safely. “For the most part, there is a slight feeling of relief that the church is open once more,” says Opke.

“I say slight because there are still a few uncomfortable reminders that we are not totally out of the woods yet.”

Anglicans are gearing up for a planned return on Sept. 13. For those who are accustomed to the rich musical and liturgical traditions of Anglican spirituality, things will look very different for a time. To limit the spread of germs, there will be no congregational singing, no processions, and no wine served during Holy Communion. Masks must be worn at all times and attendees will have to sign up ahead of time to attend services.

Other traditions, though, are waiting things out. United Community Ministry doesn't expect to have in-person worship services

for some time to come. Nor is it likely that St. Andrew's Presbyterian will reopen before Thanksgiving, not when the threat of a second wave looms over public discourse. Of particular disappointment is their having to cancel this year's Living Christmas Tree event, which has ushered in the Christmas season for so many people over the last three decades.

What's Next?

Over the past six months, meeting and worshipping through computer screens has become a fact of life for local faith communities. Many leaders expect that this will continue to be the case.

“We have long been urged to embrace internet evangelization,” says Opke. “I think it is clear now that it must be incorporated into our future programs and outreach.”

Still, it is impossible for technology to replace actual human contact – especially in places of worship.

“Everybody was looking forward” to the reopening in Lindsay's Muslim community, says Abdul Sangrar. Lindsay's local Masjid was opened after four months of closure.

During that time, members stayed in touch with one another through telephone calls and recited their Friday prayers from home. Although only 12 people can be accommodated in the local mosque with physical distancing rules in place, the ability to see one another again in person more than compensates, Sangrar reports.

The merits and shortcomings of technology

GO TO
TOP

aside, many leaders suggest that COVID-19 will breath new life into how their traditions have long done things.

“In some ways, I think the pandemic reminded many church members that the ministry is not something done by the clergy or a few church leaders,” says Currie of her own denomination.

That has certainly been the case at St. Andrew’s in Lindsay, where young children, people in their twenties living on the other side of the country, university students, and older parishioners have increasingly taken on the tasks of delivering calls to worship and reading the scripture lessons.

“We are making a difference in the lives of people we would never have reached before,” says Dr. Leibovitch at St. Paul’s Anglican. “The Holy Spirit is moving the church forward and opening doors in ways we could not have imagined just a few months ago. Church as we know it has changed, but with that change we have so much opportunity!”

Park, of St. Andrew’s, agrees. Reflecting on the New Beginnings program that was to have kept her flock busy throughout 2020, Park says “I think this is our new beginning. I think this is our opportunity for renewal. *This* is our new beginning.”

According to Morgan Bell, it’s a new beginning that couldn’t have come at a more opportune time. Bell, who grew up in Ops Township, is a student of divinity at the University of Toronto.

“As religious faith is no longer a given in public life,” he says, “the church is – and will continue to be – pressured to discern what forms of servanthood, solidarity, prayer, worship, and proclamation are most faithful to our calling by God in a context of unrest.”

Keeping the faith in times of trouble, then, is a challenge that Kawartha Lakes’ venerable churches and other places of worship are poised and ready to accept.

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Jeremy Drury. Photo: Mike Oksman.

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Ian McKechnie is a graduate of Trent University and a lifelong resident of Lindsay. He presently works as a freelance writer and researcher, undertaking projects both for the museum in Lindsay and other organizations. Ian writes regularly on issues of cultural and historical significance.

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TOP

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GO TO
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