

The Harcourt Herald December 2020

The Life and Work of
Harcourt United Church





Harcourt Memorial United Church

An Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Canada

We are a people of God called together and sent forth by Christ to... **Seek. Connect. Act.**

Our Mission: Inspired by the Spirit, we participate in Christian practices that strengthen us in the building of just, compassionate and non-violent relationships.

Our Vision Statement: To be an authentic community of spiritual growth and service.

Our Core Values: Risk... Respect... Responsibility... Vulnerability... Trust

Our Purpose: To welcome and strengthen in community all who wish to serve God and follow the way of Jesus

Church Administrator:
Wendy Guilmette

Worship, Communication
and Technical Support:
Shaina Ensing

Custodian: David Kucherepa

The Ministers: The People
with Reverend Jim Ball and
Reverend Miriam Flynn

Director of Music Ministry:
Alison MacNeill

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9am to 12pm and 1pm to 3:30pm

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The Minister's Quill by Jim Ball

Harcourt Stories

"Thou, O Lord, hast been our resting place in all generations..."

Psalm 90.1

Preface

Harcourt is a diverse community, blessed with many complimenting, and sometimes colliding, self-understandings, interests, activities and hopes. Down the years, we have set this Sunday aside to remember our journey and to consider more deeply the nature of our diversity. We have done so in the hope of understanding better our gifts and possibilities as well as our challenges. Today, we remember the Harcourt story as a collection of stories. We begin where it began. Down the hill. Beside the river. As the dream and project of four young women.



A Project

In the spring of 1887, Nellie Goodeve and three other friends walked across this bridge to begin a Bible study class for children residing on the south bank of the Speed river. The clutch of modest housing was known as the hamlet of Brooklyn. It was home to the working poor of Guelph. Children from Brooklyn seldom, if ever, crossed the river to participate in the Sunday schools of Guelph's lofty downtown churches. So it was decided to bring the Sunday school to them. Led by Nellie, the women knocked on doors and secured a meeting space and gathered enough interest to hold a first meeting. They assembled in an upper room, above the general store, which later was learned to be an illegal pub. Thirteen children attended. All in bare feet. All sitting on egg crates. Things went well. The program continued into the fall. After enjoying a winter's break, the women returned the following spring. To their delight, many more children awaited their arrival. New leadership joined them too, most notably in the form of a teenager by the name of Caroline Forbes, later to be known as Caroline Harcourt. Equipping children with Bible stories remained the principal purpose of the project. But complimentary initiatives quickly formed alongside it. A sewing and knitting group was started. Literacy training was introduced. Gardening was taught. Activity nights and special seasonal events were added. It was not long before the initial project became a mission of many projects.

A Mission

The study group and its related activities moved several times in those early years. In 1905, the Brooklyn Mission, as it was now called, moved into its first formal home on Albert Street. The children gathered in its large central room, which could hold more than a hundred. The children were organized in circles, sitting on chairs. They met in this fashion for the next 19 years. In circles. On chairs. In the 1920's, the mission relocated a block south, up the hill, to a larger facility on Martin Avenue. By now, several of the early leaders included faculty members from the nearby agricultural and veterinary colleges. Through all the years of war, pandemic, depression and war again, the mission grew, adding programming, stretching the purpose, organizing new initiatives. Games. Sports. Social events. Evening worship services. Overseas mission support. A band. Choirs. Scouting. Canadian Girls in Training. And more.



As the decades passed, the Brooklyn community changed. The mission helped to change it. The so-called poor moved up, moved on or moved out. The mission lifted many into greater self-sufficiency. Brooklyn residents followed work opportunities, some staying, some going, most putting their modest beginnings behind. A few relocated to less expensive locations in town, as the university hill increasingly took on the character of a middle class neighbourhood.

A critical strategic moment came. Since the Mission had in some ways grown distant from the conditions it originally sought to improve, it had to decide whether to relocate to where the social need was greater, or to transform itself into something better suited for the community that was emerging around it.

On the surface of things the idea of a shared spiritual life matched the historic, pragmatic focus of the mission. The United Church conviction that we can do more together than apart resonated with people. Having survived the challenges of the first half of the 20th century, members looked to deepen their presence in the soil and life of the university hill. It made sense to them that a church should be here and that they should be part of it.

A Neighbourhood Church

In the mid nineteen fifties, then, a congregation was created. No more would residents need to cross bridges into town to worship on Sunday mornings. Participants in the mission and the people of the hill could remain. All that they understood church to be, and all that they understood the mission to be, would come together into one new neighbourhood church. A property was purchased. An architect retained. And a minister secured. The era of Harcourt Memorial United Church began. The new congregation met on Martin Avenue. On those Sunday mornings, for the first time in seventy years, the chairs of the mission were moved out of their circles into rows to accommodate the growing number of worshippers and to mimic what many had experienced in downtown sanctuaries. But the spirit of Harcourt was different. It was less formal, more practical. By the time the congregation moved into its new facility on Dean Avenue, in 1962, it was well poised to take advantage of the energy of newness, modern space, expanding purpose and the baby boom. One in three residents on the hill were members. It was thought that this strong sense of neighbourhood and church connection, birthed and rooted in the bonds of common cause forged in the era of the mission, would go forward and translate into ever growing numbers and increased participation.



What the congregation could not have known was that, in the early nineteen sixties, the United Church of Canada would reach peak membership, and that the graph trend would run downhill thereafter. What the congregation could not have known was that the easy and close relationship between church and state was about to unravel, and with it society's encouragement of church membership. What the congregation could not have known was that the long held faith in public and religious institutions, and in their authority, was about to be deeply questioned, and, by many, rejected. The age of secularism and consumerism had come, and for the next sixty five years it has been grinding away at the remaining ties and purposes that bind.

A National and Ecumenical Church

Early Harcourt benefitted from strong social bonds, shared interests and activities, and common middle class values. Participation in this tapestry of faith, service and social life *was* church. Church members agreed to refrain from using professional titles. And they found their way into the forms and procedures of the wider United Church. The change in times and models brought with it a sense of progress and joy. Core programming, like Sunday school, choirs, youth camps, and women's groups, thrived. But the times also brought challenge and a sense of dis-ease. Unlike the mission, Harcourt needed to be financially self-resourcing. Unlike the mission, connecting to newcomers in the growing neighbourhood proved more difficult than first imagined. Unlike the mission, students at the newly formed university were not quick to attend church. Moving forward on all fronts seemed harder than hoped. We complained about these things back in the 1960's!

Members listened and learned their way through much of it, gaining better understanding of emerging church and social issues. Some of our struggles were not pretty, and prompted changes in personnel. Some were reflected in the number of times we rewrote staff and Council position descriptions. Always we sought ever greater comprehension, effectiveness and equality. We became really good at writing reports. We added to the building. We trained ministry students. We housed refugees. We hosted educational events, retreats and study groups. We buried our dead. We watched over each other's children. We welcomed infants with water, love and prayer. We put on musicals. We kept knitting. We enabled our youth to travel abroad. We supported the Five Oaks Conference Centre. And the Mission and Service Fund. We made spiritual practice a central charism. We became an Affirming congregation. We supported the Chalmers ministry. And the ecumenical campus chaplaincy. And, more and more, we returned to the practice of meeting in circles, on chairs.

Down these same decades many people moved to Guelph. A goodly number found a spiritual home at Harcourt. Some younger. Many older. Each contributed wisdom, energy and resource. Each also contributed sto-

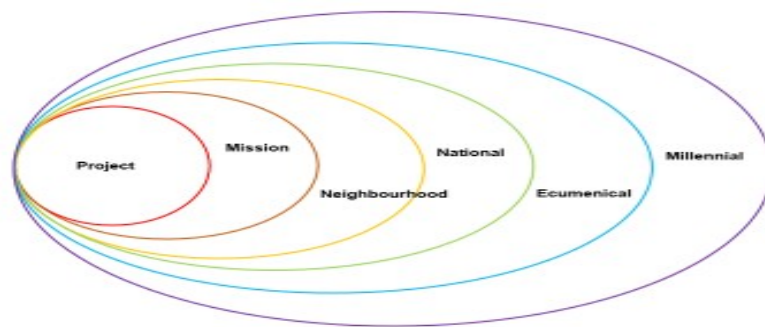


ries of churches experienced elsewhere, and the practices and expectations that followed them as a consequence. These new members came from United Churches and from churches of other denominations. We are stronger for their presence. They have added to our diversity and to our understanding.

A Millennial Church

In the 21st century, our diversity has increased and our challenge deepened. But so too has our understanding and attention to process. Millennials remind us that society has stopped looking to the church as a principal means of effecting social good. Millennials approach personal and social transformation, purpose finding and community, creativity and accountability, and the *something more* that in previous times was referred to as God and faith, in ways more diverse, more pragmatic, more nimble than what went before. As others have said, it is a “*brave new world*”, and “*not a country for old men*”. Or, at least, not for *old forms*. Scripture expresses the sentiment this way: *new wine requires new wine skins*.

The task of carrying all of this diversity of thought, form, and practice is the work of story. And over our 133 years we have needed to employ several to help us hold the centre on our life and work. ***The story of a small project***, a bible study group, was helpful. But the story was not big enough to describe and propel forward the mission that followed it. ***The story of the Brooklyn Mission*** was helpful, but eventually was not big enough to house and guide the fledgling neighbour church we became. ***The story of the Harcourt neighbourhood church*** was helpful, but proved not big enough to house and guide the community as we continued to welcome the many gifted people who came to us from across the country and from other denominations. ***The story of Harcourt as a national and ecumenical church***, as a hub and centre for a broader mix of faith, thought, service and energy, was helpful, but now strains to be big enough to interpret and harness the power of the principles, priorities and practices of the emerging generations. Just how do we, or ought we, or might we tell the story now?



Each story envelops what went before and carries it forward in a new narrative of meaning. Where on this diagram did we join the journey? Which of the stories did we encounter most when we first arrived? What kind of church story did we bring with us and try to add? To which version of the Brooklyn/Harcourt story does our heart and mind naturally drift today? And what factors are helping us hear each other well now, as we begin to discuss and discern together a common path forward, especially when so many ideas, metaphors, assumptions, longings and fears are in play?

The challenge of the trajectory is not found simply in its growing weight and complexity. It rests also in the lack of clarity and consensus among members about what narrative we might next employ to help us bear it. It rests also in the fact that we are growing tired of accommodating the cathedral of this complexity. There are moments when something simpler, smaller, less complicated appeals, like a chapel space that does not overwhelm.

At the moment, there is already a story being used to carry and interpret us. Though not named aloud, allow me to try to do so now. It is the story and metaphor of the United Nations version of church. It is noble in theory. It elevates openness and inclusion. But its reality is too often one of unending expanding expectation, division, gridlock and powerlessness. And a story cannot guide if it leads everywhere.

Thankfully, we have other options. Among them this: FDR once said that *we may not be able to build the future for our children, but we can build our children for the future*. If ever a statement expressed well the purpose of us, his words come close. For the historical record shows that ***we equip people here. We help people grow. We embrace the attitude of the student.*** Every story of us has a version of equipping at its centre. We grow fruits and vegetables, understanding, compassion, character, community, gratitude, generosity, joy, openness of mind, curiosity of spirit, resolve born of hope, respect for difference and the skills for healing division and hurt. Tools for living. Tools for loving. Tools for building relationships and partnerships. Tools for greening lives and landscapes, inside and out. Our long-held purpose stares us in the face. Many stories have carried it. Many songs have given it voice. We need only remember. And work together to wrap a new narrative around it, one that will help us recall who we are and where we are trying to go.

And, by the way, we grow and equip people not because we think one another *deficient*. We do so because we consider one another *called*. We see each other as beloved people who have been invited to meet the coming moments of life with ever greater thoughtfulness and grace. To be leaven in all conversations, peace in all moments of conflict, compassion in all contexts of wound. It is lifelong work for everyone, a work requiring our intention, commitment, humility and joy. Our history documents the ways in which we have done and been so, the ways in which we, at one and the same time, have been enough and yet always reaching for the possibility of us.

So has been the journey. Or, what, in part, I have seen in it. For 133 years, we have been a purpose, wrapped in not one but many stories, embodied by an ever changing community, that has believed in people, bettered people, buoyed people up and blessed a wider world. Such has been our focus down all the years. Such has been our resting place in all generations. In and through such, we have come to know the gift of one another and the mystery and grace of God.

Amen.

©jmball November 2020

*With gratitude for the work of Marilyn Whiteley and her excellent book
on the history of Harcourt Memorial United Church.*

Letter from the Editor's Desk.

Marion Auger

I hope the first Harcourt Herald with its new editor was well received... It was a bit lengthy, but that's also the good news: people want to share what matters at Harcourt! This for me, is a sign that the Herald is indeed an important communication tool for our congregation.

Two points to this:

First point: it is difficult to read the whole Newsletter in one go. Did you know you can change the Adobe reader to let you continue reading from the last page you read?

Go to Edit – Preferences in your Adobe PDF Reader.
Then choose the Document tab and check the option: "Restore last view setting when reopening documents."
So the next time you reopen your PDF book, you will be able to continue reading from exactly where you were when you closed the PDF document.

Or:

You can go to a particular page:

Go to View – Page Navigator in your Adobe PDF Reader. Then choose the option: "Go to page..."

I also included a click-able Index on page 3.

Second point: Many of you like to have a hard-copy of the Harcourt Herald. We have now a pick-up box for the current Harcourt Herald on the parking lot side of the main entrance.

This December issue is dedicated to an acknowledgement of Jim and Anne Ball's leaving Harcourt and thanking them for their wonderful services to us. Also, in this issue, we recognize that this Christmas season will be totally different for so many of us. So how do we cope?

We encourage you to make use of the section LETTERS TO THE EDITOR letting us know how/what you like your Harcourt Herald to be.

A very peaceful Christmas to all of you.



Letters to the Editor

Peter Gill



Dear Marion,

Thank you for taking over as editor of the Harcourt Herald – this is an important communications tool within the Harcourt community, especially during Covid when many of us are disconnected from one another.

Thank you also to Gill for faithfully producing the Herald for the past many years.

Having said how important the Herald is in the time of Covid, I confess that I have never read the newsletter online although I admit that I scanned the most recent one, mainly to see how long it was – 42 pages. I personally feel that I spend more than enough time in front of a computer screen as it is so the prospect of additional reading, interesting as it may be, simply does not appeal. This past week I picked up the Harcourt Christmas flyers to distribute in my neighbourhood and was delighted to see some actual hard copies of the November Herald – I haven't read the whole thing but there's a much better chance than an online copy.

A couple of suggestions:

Would the communications committee consider conducting a survey to find out how many folks actually read the online version (before and during the pandemic)? You might want to add a couple of extra questions re length, content etc. but I would leave that up to you and the committee.

Instead of a monthly newsletter of 40-50 pages, could you compile them as you currently do (deadline 20th of the month) and release 3-4 articles a week in the weekly e-bulletin? Personally, this would feel much less onerous to me.

I am 100% in favour of the newsletter encouraging feedback via letters to the editor so that we foster a healthy two-way communication.

Thank you for the opportunity.

MANNA News

by Julie Henshaw

So much has been going on at Manna! Here are just a few of the things we've been up to. During the last week of Creation, we celebrated Sabbath by learning and practising some yoga together. Jim shared a beautiful prayer of gratitude



with us (posted below), and we even learned actions for the prayer! Special helpers from Manna delivered Halloween treats to all the Manna participants. During the Season of Remembrance, we reflected on Peace. We learned about compassion through a story about the Dalai Lama. Also during the season of Remembrance, we wondered together about Community. We watched a video about a community who worked together to make musical instruments for children out of recyclable materials found in landfills. We sang and prayed, and saw how Jerry and Shannon also made music out of everyday materials such as pots, a bucket and spoons!

Here is Jim's prayer from Sabbath Sunday:

First Light Prayer - a prayer of gratitude (with actions) Jim

Thanks for the day that breaks
bright upon the land
and upon my heart.

Thanks for the light that chases
darkness from the skies
and from my mind.

Thanks for the breath that stirs
all beings to life
and breathes me new
into the day.

Thanks and thanks again
for the gift.

May I never forget.

Amen



Sunday service MUSIC- Behind the Scenes

Jerry Daminato

Ever wonder how we do it? How do we put many voices and instruments together and play music on Sundays (Manna and our 10:30 service) without being in the same room?



Answer: We stay socially distant and can create this music anywhere in the world...as long as there is internet service.

Here are the steps that we are using for Manna (usually coordinated by Shannon Kingsbury.) Our regular Sunday service music is created very similarly and Alison co-ordinates that.

- 1 Decide on the music/song, key, tempo, verses
- 2 Record the first “bed” track. Example piano or rhythm guitar. We are using iPhones/Androids/iPads with and without microphones, P.C.’s, and MacIntosh computers.
- 3 Send this “bed” track to the next contributor who will listen to it on earphones and sing or play their instrument in time along with the bed track.
- 4 This is sent back to the coordinator who will place the recording into some software and line it up in time with the first track. Software can be Adobe, Garageband or LogicProX. If there are 15 instruments/voices, bells then there will be 15 tracks/entries into the software (DAW).
- 5 Next the whole group is edited and mixed together, adjusting volumes to balance everything together. The editing can often be very time consuming with cutting and pasting and muting and whatever. Sometimes, additional software like reverb is introduced to enhance the individual or overall sound.
- 6 When that is completed, it will be sent to whoever is going to create a slide show or movie where lyrics can be introduced and synchronised/positioned into the song at the correct spot. If there is video, then it has to be introduced/edited etc.
- 7 The final product is sent to whoever will be using it for the respective Sunday service, or uploaded to the website.
- 8 Etc.

So you can see that there is a lot of back and forth, coordination, thought, timing and skill involved. Then there are the glitches. For example “I sent you that track via Google Drive... didn’t you get it?” Or it’s 9:00 Saturday night and there’s a phone call: “I’ve uploaded it three times and it still won’t go!” Help?

There are many hands involved in preparing our services for your spiritual enhancement.



Council News (for December 2020 Herald)

With faith and hope,
Lorraine Holding, Council Chair

On November 18, Council continued our work and focus on moving forward into a busy year ahead.

Short-term Staffing Plan

Council approved a short-term staffing plan recommended by the Transition Steering Team with support by Ministry & Personnel Committee. Knowing that our discernment process and decision-making about a future staffing model will likely take up to a year, we will take a three-pronged approach rather than looking for a full-time Supply Minister appointment. The pandemic will continue to affect how we connect with Harcourt folks using technology. This approach will provide flexibility to test potential scenarios that might evolve during our discernment time.

- **Three temporary part-time contracts:** Following consultation with Rev. Diane Blanchard, Minister for Pastoral Relations in Western Ontario Waterways Region (WOW), position descriptions have been developed for a **Supply Minister for Pastoral Care** (20 hrs/week) and a **MANNA Lead Coordinator** (15 hrs/week). We are awaiting approval to proceed with recruitment. A position description for an additional **Tech Support** person is under discussion.
- Our three **Voluntary Associate Ministers and other lay leaders** will be tagged with special pastoral roles in which they have expressed interest (coordination of pastoral care initiatives, graveside services or weddings).
- **Supply preachers/speakers** will be required for pre-recorded worship services every other week when Miriam continues her rotation with MANNA.

Planning our discernment process is the second task of the Transition Steering Team.

Sanctuary Maximum Capacity During COVID-19

Council approved a recommendation from the Re-entry Planning Group setting maximum seating capacity on the main level of the Sanctuary at 60 people. That number includes guests and all others who officiate, usher, and greet people in the parking lot and at the door. We are pleased that Harcourt could successfully provide support for a recent memorial service and a wedding.

The Re-entry Planning Group is carefully watching local public health advisories to determine if any changes to our protocols are required. Worship Committee has not recommended a return to in-person Sunday worship in the building at this point.

GUM Discernment Process: Opportunity and Universal Experience of COVID-19

Rev. Paul Miller has prepared a proposal to complete his contract with GUM churches. It would include a series of on-line facilitated conversations with the aim of involving as many people from the four churches as possible to explore the impact of COVID-19 and imagine the opportunities that could come out of this time. This process will take place between January and Easter. Council approved this motion: Harcourt agrees to participate in and contribute to ongoing conversations with the other GUM churches with a goal to gain greater clarity on shared purpose and vision in 2021.

Other Issues

On behalf of Finance Committee, Brian Magee presented the first draft budget for 2021. Work will continue during the weeks ahead, adjusting to impacts of the pandemic and our discernment time.

People committed to working on research of the details required to implement the change to flexible seating in the Sanctuary (even for a temporary change) have not come forward. For this reason, along with the other important issues to be addressed during our discernment process, Council decided to postpone definitely to our May 2021 meeting, a motion about temporary removal of the pews. Changes to increase flexibility within our space are one part of our future.

Of special note, December brings our retirement celebration for Jim. Keep watching for details from the small planning group, led by Mary Harding. Tributes to Jim and Anne are being gathered. We will miss them, yet offer our best wishes and blessings for their journey together.

Experiencing Advent and Christmas will be different for everyone this year. May we find comfort and peace in whatever changed circumstances we find ourselves.



Property Committee Update

Dave Hume, Chair of the Property Committee

First, the Harcourt Property Committee is actively recruiting new members. Some of our members have served well for a long time and would like to step down, The Committee especially needs a person to help Wendy develop contracts with renters. We also need a handyperson who is good with tools, chain saws, gardening and/or boiler maintenance. Please contact me if you have an interest or would like more information (dhume@uoguelph.ca).



During the past month, the Property Committee, among other things, had an outside cleanup, including removal of several branches from large trees on the property, got gardens ready for winter and renewed a contract for snow removal from the parking lot, mulched the leaves into the grass and made some of the arrangements for All Things Christmas on Nov. 28. We also renegotiated a contract with Royal City Pre-School that will allow the Pre-School to continue to operate as their enrollment begins to increase.



Financial Update: Not sure how much?

Submitted by the Finance Committee

During these unprecedented times when you have not been able to attend a church service you may have lost track of how much you have donated to Harcourt this year. If so and you want make sure you are supporting Harcourt to your fullest intent you may request a statement of your givings year to date. Heading into a new year with uncertainties will require your continued support to fulfill Harcourt's purpose and community commitments. All donations are greatly appreciated.



Please contact Heather Hoeg at hoeg@rogers.com or 519-265-5956 to request a statement of givings for the year to date.

Asking questions, glimpsing visions, dreaming dreams

Peter Jackson

What is the Dream Factory?

We're an unofficial ad hoc group asking questions about the future, sharing responses and following the promptings of Spirit as best we are able. Our intention is to gain clearer insights for ourselves and to be open about what we are doing in the hope that others will find our musings useful. The Dream Factory is the name we gave ourselves as a jokey reminder to not take ourselves too seriously.

We acknowledge that various groups within Harcourt and GUM have been addressing the future in various ways. Most of the Factory participants will continue to be heavily involved in those efforts, and will respect the protocols established for their work. Nonetheless, we find it liberating to engage with each other as Factory free of pressure to make decisions or manage organizational expectations.

The Factory first met in October, when seven people representing Communications, Worship and Spiritual Life Committees got together to try to sort out our 2021 Committee budgets. We found that each of us is wrestling with big questions that go beyond the mandate of any of us. The pandemic has made apparent the need to work across organizational silos to address big questions about the future.

The participants in the first Factory conversation were Peter Jackson, Bill Lord, Bill Chapman, Joan Barham, Daniel Ganesh, Karyn Davies and Kathy Magee who convened the group. Lynn Hancock, Mark Sears, Pam Girardi and Rosalind Slater joined as well for the second (November) conversation.

The Dream Factory met in November to consider responses to the questions we posed to ourselves in October:

What future vision of the church are we working towards?

In what ways does that vision of the church differ from the past?

Are the differences about fundamental purpose and values or about how to live them out?

As we sorted through the responses received from ourselves and two others who responded to our invitation in the October Herald, three themes emerged.

- 1 The future will not be like the past. Even when the church building on Dean Avenue is re-opened, things will be very different. Technology is here to stay, for example.
- 2 There is a yearning to cast aside the burdens of maintaining the institution of 'church' and simply be a movement of people who feel called to follow Jesus. We want to be part of something that is a significant blessing to the world.

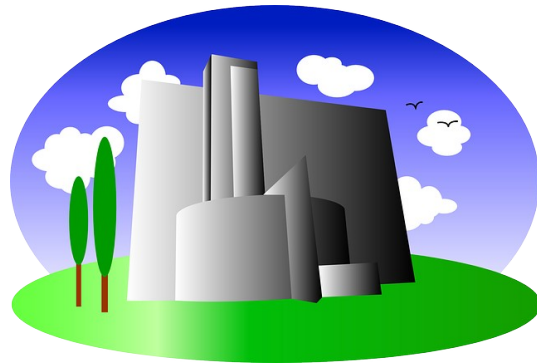
- 3 To find our way forward, we need to sharpen our focus on what we will do together as a community of faith. We need to name the particular ministries we intend to pursue so as to then marshal resources and energy to pursue them.

We intend to meet again in December. This time, the question we will address is this:

What do we want to be the six jewels in Harcourt's crown?

These jewels would be the focus of Harcourt going forward. They would comprise the key ministries we are pursuing and drive the identification of competencies and resources needed. They would be what Harcourt is known for, and they would be what the broader community looks to when assessing our relevance.

If you'd like to offer your own assessment of the six jewels, please respond to pdjackson@rogers.com.



A Guide to the Liturgical Year – Year “B”

The Season of Advent

Andre Auger

Another Liturgical Year is about to start! I'd like to offer brief reflections on each Season of the Year as they approach.

Typically, Harcourt celebrates Advent with the four candles for Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The Church's Lectionary, on the other hand, offers reflections on different aspects of waiting in darkness. These are the readings for Advent in Year “B,” the second Year in a three-year cycle of readings.

Advent 1	Mark 13:24-37	<i>A time of waiting, awake</i>
Advent 2	Mark 1:1-8	<i>John the Baptizer announces the One we are waiting for</i>
Advent 3	John 1:6-8, 19-28	<i>John points to One who is coming</i>
Advent 4	Luke 1:26-38	<i>The Annunciation</i>

This season recalls the waiting for the birth event of Jesus, but invites us to actively bring about the “Christ.” In Advent 1, we are not waiting for some super-hero to come down from the sky

and fix our mess. It's our mess! The operative word in this text is “stay awake!” In Advent 2, we are called to cross into a “promised land,” the alternative community that Jesus calls the “Kingdom of God.” In Advent 3, we are told that the one who comes will pick up the great themes of Jewish longing of Sabbath and Jubilee. In Advent 4, we are all called to be Marys: to be so open to God – the Spirit, or Gabriel – that we are always ready to say with her “let it be with me according to your word.”

At the end of this issue, you will find four meditations for Advent based on these readings.



Harcourt Quilting Group

submitted by Jill Gill

This group creates machine-sewn quilts from donated materials and in turn, donates them to those in need. Last year we donated 16 quilts with matching pillowcase to young adults who were leaving the care of foster families. We arranged this through Carolyn Tait-Guest, Development Co-ordinator for Family and Children’s Services, Guelph-Wellington.

Normally we meet on the 4th Monday of each month (9:30 a.m. – 1 p.m.), however, during Covid-19, we have been unable to meet as a group and look forward to resuming our work once we are able to safely assemble at the church.

We welcome donations of 100% cotton quilting fabrics and encourage new participants who have some quilting experience to join the group at any time.



Guelph Community Orchard Project – Overview

Submitted by Jill Gill

The Guelph Community Orchard Project (GCOP) is a working group of Transition Guelph and operates on two sites – Harcourt UC and the Guelph Community Christian School (GCCS at 195 College Avenue W.). Both locations were planted in September 2012 as the result of a grant sponsored by TreeCanada/Loblaws/Taste of Nature. In July 2012, a work party prepared

the planting area at Harcourt using permaculture practices – cardboard, grass cuttings, water and mulch (donated by a local arborist). Some of the plantings include: native hazelnuts, Stanley and Newport Plums, Saskatoon berries, Asian Pears, Bartlett Pear and currants. In 2013, a grant from Carrot Cache Community Resources Inc. provided funds to complete the planting of Arctic Kiwi, haskaps, strawberries, aroniaberries, mountain mint, thornless blackberries and asparagus. In the spring of 2016, two plums and one Asian Pear had to be replaced as they did not flourish. Several of the fruit bearing trees/plants have had plenty of fruit which birds and other critters have enjoyed before humans could pick them! In 2020 the hazelnut bush was laden with nuts for the first time, but before they ripened for harvesting, the squirrels managed to steal them.

In 2019 we planted a Cherry Plum tree which is being dedicated to winners of Transition Guelph's annual Resilience Awards. So far the recipients have been: eMerge Guelph (2018); WellingtonWaterWatchers and 10C (both in 2019); and Lisa Conroy, Ignatius Farm, Everdale and Ecological Farmers' Association of Ontario (EFAO) (all in 2020).

The orchard is maintained by volunteers and the fruit and nuts are available for anyone in the community to harvest. At the Harcourt site we aim to donate 50% of the yield to Chalmers Community Services Centre and GCCS donates to Hope House. Both sites mandate to aid equal access to healthy food.

If you wish to go help maintain the GCOP, please contact Jill Gill, Project Manager at peter.gill@sympatico.ca .



HARCOURT Communal Garden

submitted by Jill Gill

Over the past ten years, I have written much about the Harcourt Communal Garden. So, in order not to bore you, I'll summarize by saying that we have turned an unused, strip of grass on the west side of the church parking lot into a productive, food-bearing urban farm. In total we have harvested 6,006 lbs of produce, donated to Chalmers Community Services Centre (CCSC) to help feed some of Guelph's most food-insecure folks. This would not have been possible without the dedication and generosity of the volunteers who maintain the vegetable garden each year.

I had hoped to have some special celebration events this year in honour of our 10th Anniversary, but have been foiled by ‘guess what?’ Instead, in order to upgrade our facility, I have applied for a grant that is being offered as the Guelph-Wellington Urban Agriculture Challenge (GWUAC). This initiative is part of the Kitchen Table/Our Food Future – Guelph-Wellington’s ambitious aim to create Canada’s first circular food economy. The GWUAC is the plan of Grow Back Better – to provide support to strengthen our local food economy. Our Food Future’s 10 point recovery plan in response to Covid-19 is part of the City of Guelph’s overall economic and social recovery efforts. For more information about Grow Back Better, visit **foodfuture.ca/growbackbetter**. The grant application has been submitted and the winners will be announced on January 29th, 2021.

To help you understand a bit more about the garden project, I’m including the two essays I submitted by way of describing our project and our team to the granting body:

“The Harcourt Communal Garden (HCG) is an informal, small-scale urban agricultural activity using no-till, permaculture practices in on-ground and raised beds utilizing unused Church land to grow local, nutritious, organically-grown vegetables to help feed those in need. In ten years of production we have donated 6,006 lbs of produce to Chalmers Community Services Centre food pantry. We have maximized yields each year using crop rotation, plotted by a Landscape Architect/urban farmer. All inedible plant matter is composted and, with seasoned sheep manure, amend the soil yearly. Community volunteers participate to grow and harvest the produce. The city-wide Community Garden Festival has been hosted at HCG for the past two years; we have student volunteers from U of G’s Project Serve and gardeners interact with countless passers-by who then learn about urban agriculture.

This creates connectedness, increases food security, strengthens local food systems and promotes community resilience as part of the circular food economy.

Our site needs upgrades to significantly increase future production by installing:

1) Vertical growing system; 2.) Drip irrigation system; 3.) Eaves troughs and downspouts on shed for harvesting rain water; 4.) Fencing around the plot to deter animals; and 5.) New timber to reinforce raised beds, including accessible seating.

Harcourt Communal Garden (HCG) team:

- Coordinator (member of the Community Garden Network) who recruits and schedules weekly volunteers
- Landscape Architect/Urban Farmer who plans crop rotation; donates seeds and grows seedlings in a neighbour’s greenhouse
- Water Engineer to set up drip irrigation system across in-ground and raised beds
- Dedicated volunteers (aged 16-80 – students, working folks and retirees) with varying levels of experience – may be first time food growers. Experienced gardeners mentor less experienced.

- ‘Manna’ young families plant the seedlings each spring – a learning event for the whole family

HCG collaborates with:

- University of Guelph’s Project Serve – student volunteers contribute as directed
- Girl Guide groups earn badges helping and learning about growing food
- Master Gardeners give workshops on weed identifying, hoop house use and food growing

Regular team-led events engage and educate the congregation re: food grown (i.e. Strawberry-Rhubarb Social, Salsa Tasting and herb bundles for Thanksgiving Dinner). “

Please send prayers and positive thoughts our way to help increase our chances of receiving a grant, so that we can make much needed upgrades to the HCG in 2021.



Garden Corner

By Sandy Middleton

Harcourt’s gardens are now essentially dormant. So, what can one find of interest in the garden at this time of year? As evergreen foliage has a long association with Christmas decoration why not have a look at our evergreen conifers? Further, as the snow falls, these trees become a beautiful part of our winter landscape.



Spruce.

Spruces (White and Black) are a predominant component of Canada’s Boreal Forest. Our three trees, however, are Blue Spruce a cultivated, horticultural variety of the Colorado Spruce (*Picea pungens*), a western native found in the mountain foothills and celebrated for its blue foliage. Our trees are located at the front of the property, on either side of the east and west pathways, and by the outside door to the gym.

Spruces differ from pines as the former have short, prickly needles. Spruces are important to many wildlife species, both for shelter and their seed-producing cones.



Juniper.

Harcourt has three very large, rather gnarled, mature junipers; one by the Edna Boyce garden and two on the front lawn, to the west of the church sign. Junipers have a world-wide distribution with 13 species being native to North America. However, as junipers are extremely difficult to identify, we will have to be content to classify ours simply as “juniper” (*Juniperus sp.*). All junipers have tiny, sharp, scale-like leaves. The cones have a fleshy, blue, berry-like covering which are an important food sources for birds.

But the berries also have commercial value as they are an important ingredient of gin, contributing to its aroma and taste. In fact, the English name “gin” derives from either the French (genievre) or Dutch (jenever) words for juniper.

Perhaps, with the abundance of juniper berries available to us at Harcourt, some future entrepreneur might be able to produce “Harcourt Gin” as a lucrative fund raiser!

Cedar.



Undoubtedly, the most ‘natural’ of Harcourt’s evergreens is Northern White Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*). Although most of our plantings form the hedges that line the property, the two stands of tall, conical cedars by the path to the front door are of a cultivated variety. Unlike many conifers, cedar leaves are small and scale-like. They occur in rows around twigs and are flattened from the side, which gives a frond-like appearance. Cedar cones are small (1/2”) and bell-like.

Cedar is ubiquitous throughout our wetlands where it provides cover for wildlife and abundant food for birds and small mammals. And, of course, its wood with its rot resistance, was a vital timber to the early pioneers, and to provide the split-rail fences that are still a feature of our countryside.

Yew.



The newest of our conifers are the two, recently planted specimens, most likely of a horticultural variety (*Taxus sp.*) in the bed by the Library and Friendship Room. Yews have short,

stalked, shiny green needles that spread horizontally along the twigs. Their most unusual feature, however, are their single hard seeds that are surrounded by a unique cup-like red berry. Although the leaves and twigs are poisonous to many animals, the red berries are not poisonous to birds. This provides a mechanism for seed dispersal as the seeds pass undigested through the gut.

Yews are slow growing shrubs or trees, many achieving grand old age in excess of 1000 years, as seen in many British churchyards. Yew was also valued for its medicinal properties. For example, in the early days of cancer treatment extracts from the leaves and bark of yew were used in therapy. These natural extracts are no longer used as their properties can now be replicated synthetically.

Sources:

Petrides, G. A. 1958. A Field Guide to Trees and Shrubs.

Sibley, D. A. 2009. The Sibley Guide to Trees.

All Things Christmas

The 2020 version of All Things Christmas

by Janet Webster

It is a week away as the Herald goes to press. By the time you read this, we will know if it was a success.

In early summer it looked as though we would need to cancel due to the Covid pandemic, but as people adjusted to the new ways of doing things, many felt that it was important to continue the tradition as a way to build community and maintain our connections.

And so it began-- planning an outdoor version of ATC. The main concern was how to protect the well-being of the many volunteers who participate, create the arrangements and bundles of greenery, and provide baking treats.

With deep regret we cancelled the activities in the Friendship Room which were so popular in previous years, but crowded with eager buyers. Several volunteers 'lost' their roles running the cafe, selling jewellery and treasures.

Thanks to support and advice from the Re-entry Team, we carefully analyzed gym capacity for the days of preparation, then laid out traffic patterns and location of sales tents in the parking lot for the big sale day. We looked into setting up an on-line ordering page as well. It will not be the traditional drop-in format of the past but we are confident that it will be possible.

Did it work?? Sure hope so, many people are and have been working on so many aspects. Whether they were gathering teasels and milkweed, filling pots with soil, spraying natural material, cutting greenery in the countryside, publicizing, making wooden lollipops, arranging for music or baking, it has truly been a major co-operative effort.

As you read this, I hope ATC 2020 has been a boost to morale and community participation as well as to Harcourt finances.



Grief, Gratitude and Hope

Mary Harding

Ending our covenanted relationship with Jim Ball, giving thanks for his time with us and celebrating our ministries going forward.

December 27th will be Jim's last worship service as part of Harcourt's ministry team. Plans are in the works to make this a very special day.

Please watch the Harcourt weekly e-newsletters for updates.

Until December 21st, you can make a financial contribution to go towards Jim's gift.

Cheques, made out to Harcourt with "Jim's gift" in the memo line, can be mailed to or dropped off at the church. Funds can also be e-transferred to office@harcourtuc.ca. Similarly, these funds must be designated as Jim's gift. Although the money is given through Harcourt, no charitable tax receipt can be provided.

If you have any questions about our farewell efforts for Jim and Anne, please contact Mary Harding at harding.mej@gmail.com or 519-766-8241.



In Recognition of Jim

Kathy Magee

On behalf of the Planning Team and all those who participated in the Congregational Retreats

As co-chair of the Congregational Retreat Planning Team, I would like to recognize Jim's guidance and wisdom in the planning and implementation of the Annual Congregational Retreats. He was always available for consultation, supportive of our initiatives and ideas and willing to participate in this important event in the life of Harcourt community of faith. His ability to think deeply and creatively about themes and concepts was so valuable in creating an annual event that enriches relationships and deepens spiritual growth.



A Tribute to Jim Ball

A Tribute to Jim Ball

Lorraine Holding, Council Chair

December 2020 leads us to recognize Jim's twelve years of ministry with our Harcourt Memorial community of faith. Retirement is a time to celebrate one's vocation, remember the many people who have shared the journey, and celebrate the opportunity to explore new things.

Since September 2008, it has been my privilege to work closely with Jim. Through my time on Ministry & Personnel Committee and as Council Chair, and during many update and planning conversations, my appreciation of his leadership qualities, caring nature, theological expertise and spiritual guidance has grown. Jim's messages, liturgies and prayers have provided food for thought, challenge and comfort.

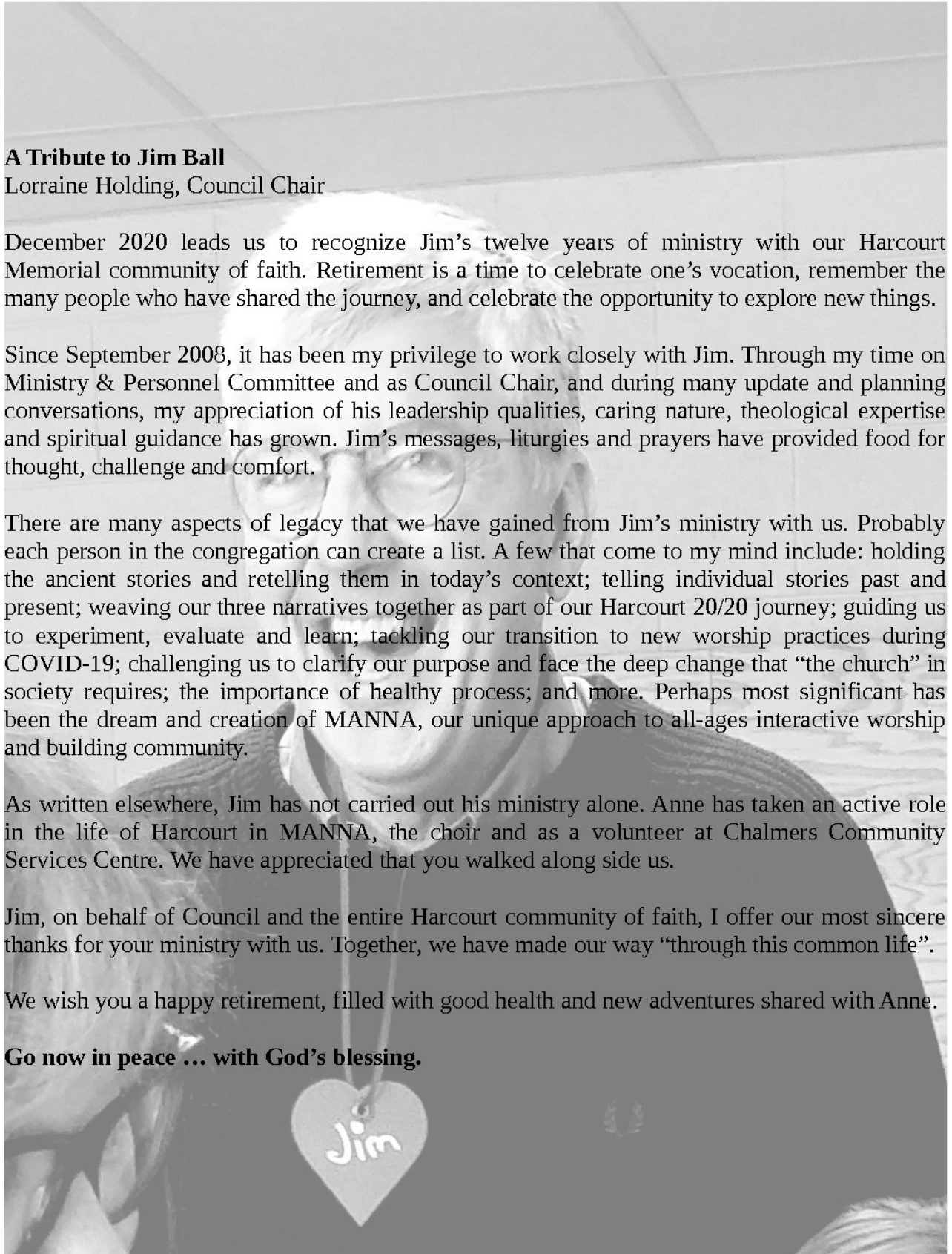
There are many aspects of legacy that we have gained from Jim's ministry with us. Probably each person in the congregation can create a list. A few that come to my mind include: holding the ancient stories and retelling them in today's context; telling individual stories past and present; weaving our three narratives together as part of our Harcourt 20/20 journey; guiding us to experiment, evaluate and learn; tackling our transition to new worship practices during COVID-19; challenging us to clarify our purpose and face the deep change that "the church" in society requires; the importance of healthy process; and more. Perhaps most significant has been the dream and creation of MANNA, our unique approach to all-ages interactive worship and building community.

As written elsewhere, Jim has not carried out his ministry alone. Anne has taken an active role in the life of Harcourt in MANNA, the choir and as a volunteer at Chalmers Community Services Centre. We have appreciated that you walked along side us.

Jim, on behalf of Council and the entire Harcourt community of faith, I offer our most sincere thanks for your ministry with us. Together, we have made our way "through this common life".

We wish you a happy retirement, filled with good health and new adventures shared with Anne.

Go now in peace ... with God's blessing.



Thanks to Jim and Ann

Joan and Richard Barham

Jim thank you for your superb skills in enabling us all to place ourselves in the messages you shared with us at Sunday service. Introducing us to the “shift’ and new ways to see how we can walk in Jesus way in contemporary society; your immense theological understanding, poetic self, visual images, breadth of reading, broad connections, creativity, original thinking; wound themselves in a splendid telling of the message we were hearing from you. A style of delivery which was unique in how it unfolded, spoke to us and captured our full attention.

The 60 hour weeks when pastoral care and pressure of other Harcourt matters were simply there, needing to be attended to. Your ability to listen to our individual thoughts and respond; share frameworks in which we could consider difficult issues; fit in many meetings; continue to keep up to date so that we could be guided by current thinking and forward thinking in your guidance.

Your creativity, in so many ways, has been a great gift to Harcourt. I especially wish to highlight your response to starting an intergenerational, new way of worship for families - MANNA. The success of this work is evidenced in the numbers of families now connected to MANNA. Your working with the MANNA leadership team to sustain MANNA was also important to guiding the development. Success by the whole team now needs more support from Harcourt to further develop MANNA’S future.

Ann thank you for your many roles over the last 12 years at Harcourt.

Key worker in the development and work load of MANNA’S success; all the support work you have done in the community such as Saturday Night Suppers and work at the Chalmers Community Support Services Centre; the many events at Harcourt that you were involved with So much!

Special thanks for supporting Jim in his work each day. Swinging with the 60 hour weeks, with the demands of pastoral care, pressures of Harcourt needing to change in response to shifts in society because of COVID and key environmental changes etc.

Your warm conversation which centered strongly of the well being of each person and their families and needs. You were masterful at engaging, providing undivided attention and if needed connecting in support.

We shall deeply miss both of you. Blessings on your next many years.



Roz Stevenson

"GAVE UP THE MALL FOR CHRISTMAS"



Letter to God

from Jane McNamee

Dear God,

I am having a hard time thinking about the possibilities for Christmas this year in the time of the Covid Pandemic! As I write the sun is lower on the horizon and the days are getting shorter and in week or so we will start to hear Christmas Carols being heralded and the shops will sell holly and ivy to deck the halls.

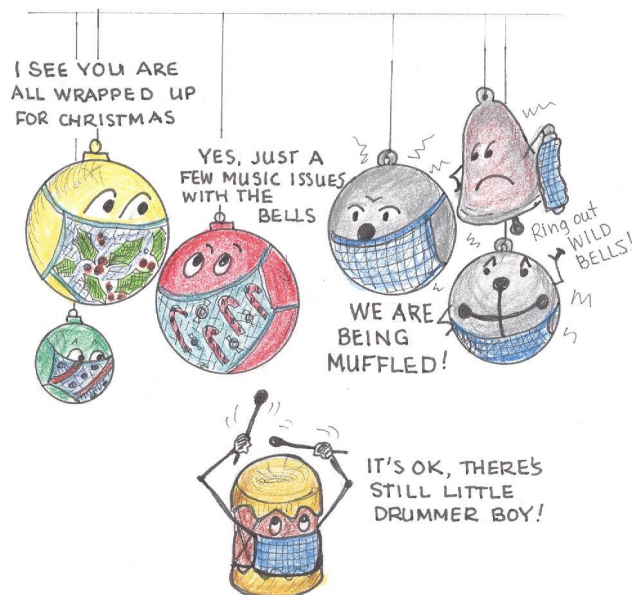
For me Christmas is a special time of year. It is about celebration! It is a religious feast, a church feast, and family feast. It is first a day of celebrating the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem with songs, carolling in a church celebration and meeting with family, friends and neighbours. Some people volunteer in hospitals or food banks, shelters.

Most of all it is a season where people rejoice in connection with others. But now because of Covid, in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic we have to isolate ourselves, wear masks, and stay in our contact bubbles.

We cannot get together in churches, we can only zoom our carolling. But thru the magic of "Face Time" we can visually connect with our Children and grandchildren! When we sing ' Oh come all ye faithful', we are alone, even the three kings have Two others beside the one I represent. We cannot chirrup "deck the Halls" as we have still to isolate, and remain safe. We may hear the heralds sing, but it is only on zoom with a faulty internet connection.

This season of celebration calls for especial dedication in our commitment to honour the birth of our Saviour, and consciously act to prevent any further spread of unknown unknowns relating to the pandemic.

And here is how Roz Stevenson sees it:



Legacy Giving: Your gift will make a difference

Carol Jones

On National Philanthropy Sunday your Board of Trustees at Harcourt included an announcement about Legacy Giving. We presented the importance of giving Legacy gifts and our responsibility to plan for the long-term future of our Church.

What is Legacy Giving and how is it different from regular weekly donations?

Gifts given from our accumulated assets are called “legacy” or “planned” gifts because donors usually plan them ahead with considerable forethought. A congregation’s ongoing operating expenses usually come from members’ regular weekly offerings.

Planned gifts that will come to the church *in the future* may include bequests from wills, life insurance, annuities, RRSP’s, RRIF’s TFSA’s and charitable remainder trusts. Planned gifts that may come to the church *in the present* could be stocks, bonds, mutual funds, personal property, including real estate and other types of bonds.

Whether your interests lie with our congregation or with programs and ministries of the wider church, or both, a gift from your estate will help to build Harcourt and the United Church of tomorrow. All Legacy Gifts are honoured and personally recognized.

This year, the world is reshaping our priorities. We are asking you to help us reshape Harcourt for the future. *Your gift will make a difference.*

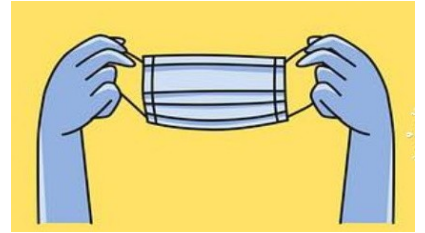
If you have questions, please go to Harcourt’s website to find “Donations through Legacy Gifts” and the brochure “Gifts that last Lifetimes.” Questions can be directed to the Trustees by leaving a message at the Church Office, 519-824-4177.

Psalm 145:4

“What you have done will be praised from one generation to the next.”

The Ecumenical Campus Ministry - Guelph

ECM is preparing some Advent care packages for university students, and we'd love to include some homemade COVID masks. Do any of our partner churches have some masks that they might donate - preferably made with love? Send us a message if you have any leads.



Passages



We share with you the news that Margaret Alexander passed away on November 10, 2020. Please hold her family and friends in heart and prayer as they grieve her loss.

Wedding on November 14th of Amanda Van Ryswyk to Brandon Grime

Meditations for Advent

Andre Auger, on behalf of the Spiritual Life Committee

Advent 1 Mark 13:24-37 A time of waiting, awake



The Coming of the Son of Man

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

The Necessity for Watchfulness

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

The take-away of this strange apocalyptic text is this: “waiting” is simply too passive a stance for what is really expected of us: after all, we are not waiting for some super-hero to come down from the sky and fix our mess. It's our mess! The operative word in this text is “stay awake!” Don't be fooled and lulled by the spin put on everything by the dominant culture. Think things through for yourself; don't even let the Christmas Season lull you into complacency: you're merely being asked to contribute to the running of the economy by buying.

In what ways do you try to “stay awake” in these times of “fake news” and conspiracy theories? Given the overwhelming scope of the challenges today, what is one step you could take within your sphere of influence to help move things in a better direction? What might you pray for? Is there a charity or not-for-profit organization or a political movement you could support? How else might you live out your call to be a blessing to the world? You are encouraged to seek out an opportunity to explore your answers with someone you trust.

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”



John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

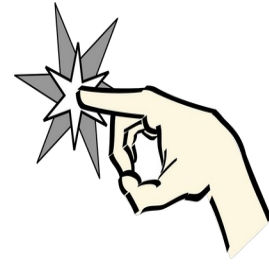
Why would someone be promoting a ritual crossing of the Jordan (“baptism”) at this time in the history of the Jewish people? First century Palestine was a time of considerable unrest and tension. People were being reminded of God's promise of a “Promised Land” despite appearances. Perhaps this Gospel reading can allow us to spend some time recalling the state of things in our time: the growing number of homeless; the increasing gap between the richest and the poorest; acts of terrorism committed by an increasingly angry and desperate group radically opposed to the materialism and consumerism of the West; a growing climate of fear; the breaking down of experiments in shared governance; rampant climate change resulting from human abuse of the environment. Are we not called to cross into a “promised land,” the alternative community that Jesus calls the “Kingdom of God”?

What is the “Promised Land” that you long for? What would it mean for you to undergo a baptism of metanoia (“higher mind”) so that you might join the faithful ones in bringing about God's Kingdom despite the darkness of the times? Given the overwhelming scope of the challenges today, what is one step you could take within your sphere of influence to help move things in a better direction? What might you pray for? Is there a charity or not-for-profit organization or a political movement you could support? How else might you live out your call to be a blessing to the world? You are encouraged to seek out an opportunity to explore your answers with someone you trust.

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Advent 3 John 1:6-8, 19-28 **who is coming**

John points to One



There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

The Testimony of John the Baptist

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

This text so much as says this: in a culture redolent with talk of end-times and longing for a Messiah to extricate it from its oppression under the Roman occupation, this text situates John the Baptizer in the line of the great prophets and prepares for one even greater. John declares himself as a mere pointer to one who comes. And the one who comes will pick up the great themes of Jewish longing of Sabbath and Jubilee. And, through his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection, he provides the power and thrust we will need to bring God’s world to full fruition.

In what ways might we be called – individually and as a community – to be “light” in these times? How might we point to the Way of Jesus? Given the overwhelming scope of the challenges today, what is one step you could take within your sphere of influence to help move things in a better direction? What might you pray for? Is there a charity or not-for-profit organization or a political movement you could support? How else might you live out your call to be a blessing to the world? You are encouraged to seek out an opportunity to explore your answers with someone you trust.

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The Birth of Jesus Foretold

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The primary point of this text is to state that Jesus, not the Emperor, is truly the son of God. A treasonous claim, to be sure, in the context of the Roman Empire and its state religion. Spiritually, this story has much to teach us: we are all called to be Marys: to be so open to God – the Spirit, or Gabriel – that we are always ready to say with her “let it be with me according to your word.”

How might we say “Yes!” every time we are truly inspired by God? Do we spend too much time applying secular measures to the whisperings of God: is it wise? what could be the consequences? can I do this? what will people think of me? Mary simply said yes. Given the overwhelming scope of the challenges today, what is one step you could take within your sphere of influence to help move things in a better direction? What might you pray for? Is there a charity or not-for-profit organization or a political movement you could support? How else might you live out your call to be a blessing to the world? You are encouraged to seek out an opportunity to explore your answers with someone you trust.

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