

Harcourt Memorial United Church

A Christian Community of Faith – Our Story

“We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the road, we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”

Richard Gillard, *Servant Song, Voices United*

OUR VALUES

We at Harcourt are travellers on a common journey in search of spiritual sustenance. We travel at different speeds; we pause on the road; we gain insights along the way. But all of us – old and young, families and singles, those of different ethnicities and nationalities and gender identities – are here to help each other as we explore our faith. The values we espouse as a congregation are those that Jesus taught – risk and respect, responsibility, vulnerability and trust.

OUR VISION

Covid and the retirement of one of our ministers in December 2020 have given us a wonderful opportunity to answer “a call from tomorrow” as another hymn puts it. This involves transforming our building into a neighbourhood hub, a place where all, including other communities of faith, are welcome to develop their spirituality through worship and discussion and the promotion of social justice. Our space is varied and flexible, a perfect meeting place for concerts, lectures and community events, large and small.

Opportunities for young people will continue to expand through our Manna group and we will continue to develop the technical skills to connect with those who long for a faith connection but can't or don't wish to come to a church building. Those technical facilities will also make our building an inviting option for rental by other groups.

OUR COMMITMENT

Our vision and values are expressed through worship and support for groups and individuals in our congregation and the larger community. In each of these areas of strength, we have been required to respond to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

In some ways, Covid has done us a favour, but especially in our response to worship. Our choir director gathered the voices of her choristers through the wonder of smart phones. Lay leaders read prayers and Bible passages from back yards and camp sites. Our minister spoke from her living room. Then in 2021, we installed live streaming and we now are considering other exciting possibilities.

Our activities in the community and within the congregation have also had to undergo change in the last two years. The old ways of doing things were no longer effective. We adapted where we could, and we will keep transforming.

Read on to learn where we are now. But remember that this is a journey and there will be planned and unexpected changes along the way!

Worship at Harcourt

Manna is a hands-on worship experience that brings together people of all ages. This group of adults, children and youth meets on Sunday in the church, or outside, depending on program and season. Manna is growing and will benefit from the new flexible worship space in our sanctuary as our pews are replaced by comfortable and moveable chairs.

Sunday service in the sanctuary is a combination of message and beautiful music that helps us translate biblical wisdom into our daily lives. The service is live streamed and available later on YouTube. This somewhat traditional worship is a source of comfort and inspiration to many – but not all – members of our congregation.

The Holy Listening Circle meets on Zoom every Sunday morning to discuss the lectionary Bible readings. As many as 30 people gather online, then break into small groups to exchange views on spiritual issues. The Holy Listening Circle has become a rich experience for members of our church and others who have no formal church connection. Although the virtual circle has roots in a discussion group that met after the early morning chapel service before the pandemic, it has taken wing during the lock downs and become a vibrant form of spiritual development. It is expected that when we return to the church building, the listening circle will add an in-person group.

Spiritual opportunities for individuals abound at Harcourt which has a long tradition of providing spiritual companionship to those who request the guidance of a trusted and trained mentor. We also provide opportunities to expand the faith journey through participation in the Ignatian exercises, offered every other year.

Our music ministry is one of the remarkable things about our church. Harcourt is noted for the creative inclusion of vocal and instrumental music in Sunday services. The choir and bell choir are cherished parts of our worship. As an affirming congregation, we are happy to be the home of Rainbow Chorus Waterloo-Wellington.

Our local faith connections include Guelph's three other United Churches. With them we form a collective, Guelph United Ministries (GUM), that provides support for GUM partners: the Ecumenical Campus Ministry at the University of Guelph and an outreach ministry, Chalmers Community Services Centre.

Caring for Our Congregation

Our midweek groups bring people of all ages together to interact and support one another. They include Mindstretch (a book discussion group), Explorations in Progressive Christianity (a group that uses the holy listening approach to consider questions of modern theology), Women's Spirituality, the choir and bell choir, Women's Friendship Circle, a prayer shawl ministry, Brownies, Guides, Cubs and Scouts. We are always happy to explore new ways of connecting with one another.

Communication with the congregation has been vital, especially as Covid kept us physically separated. Harcourt folk receive information through a weekly e-letter and monthly church newsletter, *The Harcourt Herald*. Personal delivery ensures that those without internet access receive print copies of these publications. Our website has adapted to reflect our various online activities, making it easy to participate in services and groups.

Pastoral care is provided by our ministers and individual Harcourt people who reach out to support those in the congregation going through hard times. But there is a need to do much more. A small group is working to expand lay involvement in this essential area of service.

Harcourt Cares, a Facebook group started in response to the isolation of the early weeks of the pandemic, provides a safe space for Harcourt folk to share information, concerns and encouragement. Currently the group has 88 members.

Caring for the People of Guelph and the Wider Community

Chalmers Community Services Centre is supported by Harcourt and other Guelph United churches. Chalmers serves the needs of Guelph's most vulnerable residents, including numerous refugees and their families, homeless people and many who are unemployed. Chalmers offers food, companionship in weekly cafes at two sites and referrals to community agencies.

Saturday night suppers at Royal City Mission in downtown Guelph are offered year-round to those experiencing food insecurity. Harcourt is part of a city-wide church rota that helps provide these meals.

Green initiatives have been of concern to our congregation since the installation of solar panels on the church roof 10 years ago. We continue to strive to be as environmentally aware as possible. We have an orchard and fruit and vegetable gardens on the church property, maintained by volunteers; 592 pounds of produce were donated to Chalmers Community Services in 2021. A window wall in our sanctuary looks out onto the Celebration Garden, tended lovingly by volunteers. In spring the pink blooms of the redbuds delight the neighbourhood. In June the peonies bring to mind the former minister whose garden they came from. In fall a memorial oak and Japanese maple remind us of members of our church community no longer with us.

Refugee sponsorship is a tradition in the United Church and at Harcourt. We are currently joining forces with Trinity United in Guelph to sponsor a family from Afghanistan.

OUR PEOPLE

Our congregation pre-Covid numbered about 400, mostly city dwellers, mostly white, with 60 percent of our members over 70. Fifteen percent of our congregation is under 40. About 150 people attended the three services each Sunday before March of 2020.

In 2022, changing Covid restrictions have influenced the delivery of Sunday services and attendance. Approximately 40 people participate in Manna (live or online) and between 20 and 30 take part in the online Holy Listening Circle. Sanctuary services are live streamed, with about 100 participants who might be attending in person (regulations permitting), watching online in real time at 9:30 a.m., or viewing the service later on YouTube.

Our staff is currently led by a full-time minister who will, unfortunately, be leaving us in June. We acknowledge that this is a significant loss, but we have faith that another minister will be able to fill this position and complete our Harcourt family. The minister is supported by a full-time Manna/community engagement co-ordinator and a director of music ministry. In addition, we have a church administrator, technical support personnel and a custodian.

OUR FINANCES

The pandemic has taken a toll on our finances, leaving us with a projected deficit in 2022, the result of a decrease in revenue due, in part, to lost rental income, cancellation of fundraising events and reduced donations. New fundraising initiatives, a stewardship campaign, and continued work towards adaptive changes in our programs and structure are planned so that we may continue to support our vision. Hard decisions must be considered in our near future.

OUR FUTURE

We long for the time when we can meet face to face, when groups of church friends can gather to discuss spiritual growth and social justice and do such ordinary things as play cards or lunch together.

In the meantime, in spite of our financial challenges, we are energized by the work of our transition team, which has presented Harcourt with several possible scenarios for a vibrant future of community involvement and youth engagement, based on many conversations with groups of Harcourt people in the past year.

We are on a journey to a place where we can support various communities of the faithful to live out their passion, one step at a time, into a future filled with experimentation and discovery.