

# Bridge Street United Church—A Living Faith Story

Belleville, ON

January 2023

**Welcome to this opportunity to experience a snapshot of the Bridge Street United Church community of faith in 2023! We are pleased to know that you would like to learn more about our church fellowship.**

In the context of many dramatic and far-reaching challenges posed by the pandemic, the people of Bridge Street United Church (BSUC) trust that **God is still calling us**. We believe we live together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, **upholding in ongoing discernment the needs of our worshipping community of faith** and the **needs of the marginalized in our community**. As people of faith, we are preparing to live into the future by charting a course that recognizes the realities of our present as well as our past and anticipates the perceived needs of our future faith community. We do so with the strong conviction that, in doing so, **we are responding to God's call**.

## Mission, Vision, Values

The BSUC value, from which all other values flow is this: **“We value the power of Christ's transforming and redeeming love,”** a love which calls us into a deeper relationship with the living Christ and with each other. Membership in our church includes a spectrum of theological belief and understanding, incorporating those who favour a liberal interpretation of scripture as well as those who have a more literal interpretation of scripture. Another phrase **“to be welcoming, inclusive and respectful”** from the BSUC list of values suggests that differing views are supported and encouraged as part of a fruitful experience of the faith. We recognize all of this flows from a decidedly progressive theological orientation within our faith community. This orientation has been encouraged and reinforced by the ministers who have served at BSUC over the past several decades and it is something which is considered important for our spiritual growth in the future.

**The Vision** being imagined for BSUC is not just for the worshipping church community but for “a better community”:

By God's grace, our faith community strives to be vibrant, inclusive and spiritually nurturing, inviting **everyone** into a mature, loving and sacred relationship with the living Christ.

**The BSUC Mission states this intention:**

Our Mission is to live the Good News of Jesus Christ, **reaching out beyond ourselves** to share the **transforming power of our faith** by offering **spiritual nurture within the congregation** and **providing community-rooted ministries** that serve the **local area and outreach** that respond to the needs of the wider world.

Read BSUC's Mission, Vision, Values.

## Worship Participation<sup>1</sup>

**The Worshipping Community** has experienced a decline in attendance since the beginning of the pandemic. Regular attendance at Sunday Services fluctuates between 30 and 40 with an additional 8 to 10 persons joining Worship **online through Zoom**. Services of worship are well supported by the **enthusiastic participation** of both vocal and handbell choirs. Our members are comfortable with differing styles of worship and music and have adapted well to the current less formal approach to the worship format. As indicated, services are available virtually for members and adherents who wish to participate online, a program offering which is made possible through the active involvement of volunteer members. The majority of our supporting families have continued to maintain **good stewardship** throughout the past 3 years when attendance has been compromised by pandemic realities.

## Community Engagement

Our church prides itself on its community outreach programs which include a comprehensive meal program, a community drop-in centre and ongoing sponsorship of a non-profit affordable housing complex currently administered through its own self-governing Board of Directors. Taken together, these outreach programs involve a percentage of volunteers from our church augmented by a large volunteer base from the Belleville community at large. It is noteworthy that with many of these faithful volunteers drawn to the BSUC outreach programs have no formalized church affiliation. One community volunteer commented recently that the kitchen of our church “feels like my sanctuary” which reflects the **strong fellowship and the dedicated commitment** of the volunteer staff. There is a sense that the Vision for our church is being lived out in the way that its volunteers regularly attract these new recruits from the community (i.e., “inviting **everyone into a mature, loving and sacred relationship with the living Christ**”). There is also a sense that the clients whom we call “the guests” of the program are a vital part of this overall **BSUC Vision and Mission** included in the number of those **who experience the church’s spiritual nurture in a variety of different ways**. Leadership for the program is currently provided by one full time and 3 part-time staff made possible through a substantial base of **predictably sustainable external funding** and a number of **active community partnerships**.

Another recent outreach program in place from 2015 to 2021 involved the re-settlement of 5 Syrian Refugee families (23 individuals). BSUC took a lead role in the development of a refugee sponsorship group named the **United Syrian Family Support Group** which included ecumenical partnerships with a number of other faith communities, the local mosque, as well as several community groups and organizations (with more than 80 volunteers in total). About a dozen members of BSUC took active roles in supporting these newcomers to our community, many of whom have continued to maintain contact with the sponsored families. Volunteers in this program spoke about the experience as a **journey of faith** that reinforced their **sense of the Holy Spirit at work** in our midst. The need for funds, for volunteers, for solutions to a series of challenging medical crises called for significant responses from volunteers and the community. For each situation an appropriate solution seemed to emerge, strengthening the trust and confidence that we

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<sup>1</sup> An update to the information in this section is included in an [Addendum](#) at the end of this document.

were being guided and supported throughout this journey by a power greater than we alone could offer.

**The Quinte Living Centre**, established in 1982 through the vision and financial support of BSUC offers ongoing support for **affordable housing** in our community. Its mixed market strategy provides direct support to individuals in a financially sustainable model of operation. Because of its success as a viable affordable housing project, its model has recently been replicated by others within our community.

Read a summary of BSUC's Community Engagement activities in 2022.

Read a report on the Quinte Living Centre in 2022. See also [www.quintelivingcentre.com](http://www.quintelivingcentre.com).

### Transitional Time and Intentional Interim Ministry

Bridge Street United Church is currently completing a **transitional time in our history**. For the past 5 years, the church has engaged the support of an **Intentional Interim Minister** to help guide us **through a period of change**. This support was initially intended to have a 3-year duration. Owing to 1) the desire to advance certain goals established by the congregation at the outset of the interim period and 2) the challenges posed by the pandemic, the term of our minister's employment was extended for an additional 2 years. The spring of 2023 will see the end of this 5-year transitional time.<sup>2</sup>

### Engaging an Intentional Interim Minister

The decision to engage an **Intentional Interim Minister** was made by the **former Kente Presbytery** in the spring of 2018 and continued under the East Central Ontario Regional Council (ECORC) in 2019, placing the entire Ministry under the supervision of a Commission until November 2021. This arrangement was the result of persistent tensions that existed amongst the membership regarding the vision of who we were as a **people of faith** and how we needed to position ourselves in order to respond to the needs in our local community and the realities of our changing world. Some individuals believed strongly that the church should exist for its membership and that our efforts ought to be focused on worship, faith formation (including the focus on Church School Programs) and maintaining the beauty of our worship space while continuing to offer financial support to groups and organizations outside our fellowship through the long-established trust funds. In other words, the desire was to keep doing what the church had always done in the past, only better. Other individuals in the church saw the need for our fellowship to evolve in order to better serve the emerging needs in our community and in our world. In summary **the tensions were between going forward and holding back**. Agendas began to be questioned and a lack of mutual respect began to develop to the point that significant trust was eroded.

### Setting Goals for Intentional Interim Ministry

The Intentional Interim period was designed to offer support to the congregation in its desire to foster **better relationships** within the congregation, more openness and stimulus for the

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<sup>2</sup> The period of Intentional Interim Ministry formally ended on June 30, 2023. Further information is provided in the [Addendum](#) at the end of this document.

possibility of change and a willingness to wrestle with the challenges we were facing as a church and as people of faith.

In the autumn of 2018, a Transition Team was established to support the Interim Lead Minister in managing the transition toward a more focussed and harmonious functioning of our church fellowship. And so began a period of **Discernment and Discovery** within our church.

The early steps that were part of this process were focussed primarily on fostering good communication and the nurturing of the relationships within the congregation and between the congregation and those in leadership roles.

The first 2 tasks were: 1) to develop a set of realistic goals, and 2) to address the negative behaviours that were impeding good communication and harming the key working relationships within our church. A document entitled **A Commitment to Respectful Living** was developed by the Transition Team and approved by the Governance Board. It set clear standards and expectations for respectful interactions within the congregation. In the attempt to ensure this new document was fully integrated into the fabric of our ongoing human interactions, the document has become a standard of reference for the way the leadership models respectful living and a guide for those who are part of our fellowship.

Read the Transition Team's Established Goals, 2019.

Read BSUC's Commitment to Respectful Living.

#### Discernment and Discovery

The next phase of the Interim Ministry continued to be centred on **Discernment and Discovery, this time seeking to discern and discover a deeper knowledge of** who we are as a community of faith. With this in mind, the Transition Team sponsored a series of workshops early in 2020 which offered multiple opportunities for congregational input in defining who we were as a congregation, who we might wish to become, all culminating in visioning a path forward. Subsequently the Transition Team authored a document entitled **The Vitality Report**, which describes the life and work of the church in the early days of the pandemic. Coincident with the creation of this report the Strategic Planning Group created their own report highlighting the realities and challenges of the congregation. In addition, prior to the pandemic there were 3 **Community Engagement** sessions sponsored with the goal of establishing closer ties to potential community partnerships. These sessions were fruitful in recruiting new partnerships to support the development of current and future BSUC outreach programs.

This phase of the Interim Ministry saw less in the way of disruption as compared to the first phase and/or to the period of time prior to the Interim Ministry.

Read a summary of the Three Questions Workshop and the Honouring Differences Workshop, 2019.

Read the Vitality Report, 2021.

Read the Strategic Planning Report, 2021.

### Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The onset of the pandemic brought with it a whole new set of challenges and the need to transition the worship experience to a virtual model. It required the need for flexibility on the part of our Interim Minister, the Music Director and the whole congregation. While members found the transition difficult at first, the virtual experience gave permission for a less formal, more intimate style of worship to evolve, setting the stage for a similar shift in style with the resumption of in person worship part way through 2021.

The other reality of the pandemic shutdowns was the absence of regular opportunities to gather to share worship and informal coffee hours after church. Along with this forced separation of the members came the interruption of the important work of managing the change that was underway. The sharing of thoughts, opinions, hopes and dreams for our fellowship was difficult in the absence of regular opportunities to gather and share both formally and informally. A number of groups and teams met virtually and the work of the Governance Board, Transition Team and Strategic Planning continued but there was a sense of frustration in being “apart” for such a long period of time.

### Restorative Practices

As we moved through the next phase of the Interim Ministry, it became clear that we needed a step by step process for what to do when the change process was being interrupted. **Training in Restorative Practice** was provided to the Transition Team and subsequently utilized in fostering harmonious solutions when individuals had reached an impasse. Going forward, the intent is to continue to imbed restorative practices into the culture of BSUC.

### Governance and Staff Leadership

During the period of Interim Ministry, up until now, Church Governance at Bridge Street has been headed by a Visionary Governance Board that has worked closely with the Interim Lead Minister. The Governance Board delegates authority, responsibility and financial resources to the Lead Minister who, in turn, is accountable to the Governance Board. In this capacity the Lead Minister is responsible for Worship, the oversight of day-to-day operational matters, staff supervision, support to the Ministry Teams and also sits as an ex officio member of the Governance Board, the Bridge Street Church Foundation and the Quinte Living Centre.

This current organization of staff responsibilities has required the Lead Minister to handle multiple operational matters pertaining to the **steady growth of our outreach programs** and the day to day running of the church. This arrangement has not allowed adequate time for the provision of Pastoral Care for our congregation. (This role is currently being staffed by a retired volunteer clergy person, who is a member of our church). To address this issue and to make provision for sustaining the ongoing growth and development of our Community Engagement Programs, an Operations Manager position has recently been mandated to handle oversight of the outreach programs and other operational matters relating to the church’s physical plant. This new position is intended to ensure the sustainability of the current outreach programs and enhance the smooth functioning of church operational matters, while also freeing time for the Lead Minister.

Going forward, the creation of this new role will allow for a change in the job description for the new minister we are preparing to call. The Lead Minister's role would be re-defined in 2 parts---**1) a called Minister** whose role would be focused and concentrated on **Worship, Sacrament and Pastoral Care** and **2) an Operations Manager** whose role would be defined as **Manager of the Community Development Programs and Administrator of the church facility**. The ultimate outcome in this new model, then, will be the creation of **2 equal and distinct leadership roles** within the church, each equally and separately responsible to the Governance Board. A decision has been made to adopt this organizational model for a 3 year trial period. The beginning steps in this transition are now underway.<sup>3</sup>

### Future Direction

The Interim Ministry, then has been **a time of change involving careful Discernment and Discovery**. It has allowed us to see ourselves in a different way, to accept our strengths and realize our limitations, to develop a greater alignment to the Mission, Vision and Goals of our church. It has challenged and encouraged us to recognize more fully the important role the church plays in each of our lives, and in our collective vision for the hope of something "new" yet to be born in the years ahead of us. And finally, as described above, it has given the impetus for a shift in the **Organizational Model of Church Governance**. We are a smaller community than before but there is sense that we are committed to a common mission and to an authentic practice of the faith. There is even an emerging view that our small size might be considered an asset as we continue our individual and collective journeys of faith into the future.

At recent congregational meetings, members expressed the strong desire for **spiritual nurture** from their church—"I want a community that nurtures my discipleship", "I need spiritual growth and development" "I need opportunities to be active and serve.", "I want music, fellowship, service and contributing to church outreach."

The groups within our church celebrate the enthusiastic participation of those in their fellowship. It is through these various groups that members find their **personal connection** to the church community. It is where individuals speak about experiencing the **joys of fellowship** and where they find opportunities to strengthen **their personal journeys of faith**.

### Faith Formation

The Bible Study program is a group of 10 to 12 faithful individuals who meet weekly in a hybrid model (of in person and online). The participants find the opportunity to share opinions and life experience results in lively discussion that members find personally enriching and helpful in nurturing their faith.

Recently it has been necessary to discontinue the Church School Program, owing to the diminished presence of children in worship and also the current lack of available leadership. There is some sadness about this change in our program offerings but a recognition that it is a sign of the shift in

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<sup>3</sup> The new staff leadership model was implemented effective March 1, 2023. See the [Addendum](#) for further information.



societal values and habits with fewer young families attended church. It is also reflective of the aging demographic of the BSUC congregation and our reduced capacity to provide ongoing committed leadership to a weekly church school program. (see p. 2 of the Vitality Report, 2019).

### The Choirs

The vocal choir is a group of 12 dedicated musicians who meet weekly with the supportive leadership of a part-time music director. The group continued to meet online by Zoom throughout the pandemic and offered a contribution to the worship experience with the help of a computer application that enabled the creation of collaborative online recordings. Several months ago, the choir began to meet in person once again. Members describe the choir as a loyal fellowship that is an important part of their connection to church and the worship experience.

The Bell Choir was not able to meet during the pandemic but has resumed its weekly practices in recent months and has added new members to their group since returning to in person rehearsals. There is a sense that the contribution of the bells enhances worship in a very meaningful way. The congregation is very positive about the contributions made by both choir groups.

### Knitters United

The knitters enjoy a fellowship that includes 40 to 50 individuals who meet on a weekly basis to create hand-knit articles for distribution to those in need. Begun as a Bridge Street Church initiative with leadership offered from within the congregation, the group has expanded to incorporate an increasing number of knitters from our local community. As such, **Knitters United** has come to be regarded as another important outreach of the congregation. There is a sense of satisfaction and self-worth reported by the members, with regular distribution of hundreds of home-made articles into the community. There is a strong bond that has developed amongst the membership which continued to be nurtured throughout the pandemic by regular telephone “check ins” and the safe “distanced” drop off of donated yarn and pick-up of completed items.

### UCW (United Church Women)

A committed group of 30 women in the church continued to stay in touch with each other during the time of the pandemic shutdowns. More recently, they have resumed “in person” monthly gatherings to discuss fund raising ideas, to enjoy their strong fellowship and to share ideas for ensuring their future as contributing members of the BSUC congregation. In recent years, there has been a reluctance for anyone from the UCW to assume leadership of the group, but there is a strong desire for the fellowship of the group to continue and so the women have been exploring alternate forms of sharing the leadership roles and responsibilities. This creative model relies on the willingness of many members to offer leadership at different times, in different ways.

### Bridge Street United Church Foundation

The living faith of the people of Bridge Street United Church has had a long history of deep roots in the Belleville community through its outreach programs. Thanks to a few generous benefactors, the church has substantial resources in trust and through the years the church’s BSUC Foundation has been able to provide financial support for local outreach ministries as well as for mission projects

further afield. We are aware that we are blessed by having these resources at our disposal. In recent years, it has not been possible to maintain the same level of funding grants as before. In this new era of decreasing church attendance and diminished church offerings, we are eager to ensure that the funds currently available are utilized in a way that continues to advance the Mission and Vision of our church fellowship.

Thanks to the support of a number of community partners and substantial external funding and well as individual donations, it has been possible in recent years not only to maintain the existing outreach programs but also to expand and develop existing programs which are offering significant support to the Belleville community at a critical time in our social history.



## Addendum to the BSUC Living Faith Story

July 5, 2023

The Living Faith Story was written in January 2023 and accepted by the Bridge Street United Church congregation at its Annual Meeting on March 19, 2023. There have been some important and substantive developments since the Living Faith Story was written. This addendum provides updates to the information presented in the Living Faith Story as of June 30, 2023.

### Worship Participation

Bridge Street United Church appointed a part-time Supply Minister (0.75 FTE) beginning April 1, 2023 to fill the role of Minister after the departure of the Intentional Interim Minister at the completion of the Intentional Interim Ministry process. This appointment has subsequently been extended to June 30, 2024. A major objective for this appointment is to help in the revitalization of Bridge Street United Church. Giving significant time and attention to worship and to pastoral care were identified as the two key priorities for the appointed Minister.

Attendance at Sunday morning worship services has begun to slowly increase. From April – June 2023, in-person attendance was generally between 40-50 individuals with an additional 4-5 persons joining through Zoom. Over this time, numerous individuals have remarked that this has been their first time joining in-person worship at BSUC again since the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an encouraging initial trend. The Board and Minister are making intentional efforts, for example, through pastoral care, personal connections, and refreshed communication tools, to re-engage BSUC congregants in the life of the church including Sunday morning worship.

### Transitional Time and Intentional Interim Ministry

The period of Intentional Interim Ministry formally ended on June 30, 2023. As noted in the Future Direction section of the Living Faith Story, there is a renewed sense “that we are committed to a common mission and to an authentic practice of the faith.” There is a palpable feeling of optimism about the future of Bridge Street United Church in Sunday worship and other gatherings and meetings as we emerge from the necessary, constructive, and hard work of Intentional Interim Ministry into the open future of Bridge Street Church.

### Governance and Staff Leadership

The new staff leadership model has been fully implemented, effective March 1, 2023. The Minister is responsible for worship, sacrament, and pastoral care, with limited administrative duties that are directly related to these areas of responsibility. This is reflected in the job description for a called Minister. The Director of Programs and Administration is responsible for administration and finance, facility operations and maintenance, oversight of community engagement (i.e. outreach) programming, and sustainability planning. The benefits of this division of responsibility have already become evident in the initial three-month period that this staffing model has been implemented.

Future Direction: Strategic priorities and sustainability

BSUC is actively pursuing its strategic plan which includes achieving financial sustainability. We have initiated a conversation with Kindred Works to identify viable solutions for redeveloping our facility to achieve our mission and strategic priorities of meeting the spiritual and fellowship needs of our congregation, meeting needs of our community including possibly through a community service hub or housing, and promoting financial sustainability for the Bridge Street United Church Community of Faith.

Frank Hiebert,  
Chair, BSUC Governance Board