

Bridge Street United Church (BSUC)—A Living Faith Story

Belleville, ON

Welcome to this opportunity to experience a snapshot of the Bridge Street United Church community of faith in 2023!¹ 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, with hopeful anticipation.

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.

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

In recent months, attendance at Sunday morning worship services has been slowly increasing. 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 indicated

¹ This is an abridged version of the Living Faith Story; [click here](#) to access the full version.

this has been their first time joining in-person worship at BSUC again since the pandemic. The Board and newly appointed Supply Minister are making intentional efforts, through pastoral care, personal connections, and refreshed communication tools, to re-engage BSUC congregants in the life of the church including Sunday morning worship.

Community Engagement

Thanks to the support of a number of community partners and substantial external funding, as 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.

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. Notably, a number of these faithful volunteers have no formalized church affiliation. 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.

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

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 and 2) the challenges posed by the pandemic, the term of our minister's employment was extended for an additional 2 years. This 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.

[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 BSUC 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.

[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 possibility of change and a willingness to wrestle with the challenges we were facing.

In the autumn of 2018, a Transition Team was established to support the Interim 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. 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.

[Read a Summary of **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 continued to meet virtually, but there was a sense of frustration in being “apart.”

Restorative Practices

As we moved through middle 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

Church Governance at Bridge Street is headed by a **Visionary Governance Board** that works closely with the Minister. The Governance Board delegates authority, responsibility and financial resources to the Minister who, in turn, is accountable to the Governance Board. In this capacity the 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. During the time of Interim Ministry, the Minister handled multiple operational matters pertaining to the steady growth of our outreach programs as well as the day to day running of the church.

This arrangement did not allow adequate time for the provision of Pastoral Care for our congregation. (This role was 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 was hired and mandated to handle oversight of the outreach programs and other operational matters relating

to the church's physical plant. This new position will ensure the sustainability of the current outreach programs, enhance the smooth functioning of church operational matters, and free time for the Minister.

The new staff leadership model was fully implemented, effective March 1, 2023 on a 3-year trial basis. **The Minister** is now 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

In summary, the Interim Ministry was a **time of change** involving careful **Discernment and Discovery**. It 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 gave 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.

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, and promoting financial sustainability for the Bridge Street United Church Community of Faith. In addition, in recent months, conversations amongst several Belleville United Church Congregations are taking place, with plans for increased cooperation and the sponsorship of ongoing collaborative initiatives in the years ahead.