

The Room Wins

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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In 1943, a group of parents of young children got together to discuss the need for a church in this new neighbourhood. Lawrence Park at that time was only half built. There were still some forest and ponds left, in addition to new houses that had been built in the last ten years. The neighbourhood was bounded by Lawrence Avenue, Yonge Street and Bayview Avenue. These were big roads, even then, and that was a problem for parents. Not everyone had a car in those days, so walking small children to church across those roads was a problem. Most of the people in the neighbourhood belonged to a church, but a survey at the time found that most didn't actually go. So, a small group of families started to meet to discuss the possibility of building a church within the neighbourhood. A church the kids and parents could walk to.

As the parents discussed where a church might be built, they rented an auditorium and classrooms at Blythwood school. The services began in later 1945. They were small at first - 60 adults, plus children. A minister was hired Rev W. Ernest Baker. They had to improvise. There were no collection plates, so money was gathered in the cloth bags Crown Royal whiskey came in. The communion wine was served in a silver cup someone won in a horse race. But those parents weren't wrong. Even in a school setting, the congregation grew, and before long they were looking for help to build a church in the neighbourhood.

The founding committee approached the major denominations, asking if they would build a new church. The Anglicans said no, they already had churches nearby. But the United Church said yes. It was relatively new at that point, just twenty years old. Its nearby churches were already overcrowded, so a new one sounded like a great idea. But the founding families came from many denominations - Anglican, Presbyterian, Quakers, even a few Jewish families. So instead of calling this place "Lawrence Park United Church", they chose to call it "Lawrence Park Community Church." That name reflects its roots in being a church for the community, rather than dedicated to the theological vision of any particular denomination. They received this parcel of land from the Wood family. It was a wet marshy area where kids used to catch polliwogs in the spring. The site was drained, and the church was built in three phases. In 1948, there was a big fundraising appeal to the congregation, a year when families decided not to buy new fur coats or broadloom carpet, according to one of the reports. The Sunday school building was constructed first. The sanctuary opened in 1952.

It was long and tall, with enough pews to seat up to a thousand people.

This neighbourhood was home to up and coming white collar workers. After the war, the economy was booming, and so were families. Men could get a good white collar job with just an undergraduate degree. Women were expected to marry young and have babies right away. The average age of first time mothers in the 1950s was 24. The baby boom led to a massive increase in children and huge Sunday schools. Here at Lawrence Park, there were 552 kids enrolled in Sunday school in the early '60s.

The lead minister, Rev. Dr Douglas Bradford, was hired in 1949. Dr Bradford stayed on for 38 years. Most of the time, he worked with one or two other full time ministers, one for pastoral care, and the other to run the Sunday school program and promote Christian education among adults. Dr Bradford was also the chair of church council for many decades. He retired in 1986.

When I was in seminary, one of Dr Bradford's successors, Rev. Dr William Kervin, was my professor for the worship class. He had served here for a few years in the '90s, and then went to Emmanuel College to teach.

One of Bill's lessons was that you can't fight the room. He meant that the structure of a church sanctuary sets the tone for how people experience worship.

In the 1950s, children came here in their uncomfortable Sunday best clothes to be quiet in long rows of pews. Ushers brought them and their parents to their seats. The building and its rituals taught that they needed to behave. They needed to listen to what the authority figures were saying. Pictures of the time show Sunday school classrooms with children sitting at desks, like in school.

Churches of that time were meant to teach moral lessons so people could fit into society and become productive, well behaved adults. The building's architecture stressed this quiet obedience. Indeed, in the 1960 annual report, it says that Dr Bradford gave a Bible study course called "By What Authority," while the youth group discussed topics such as "Parental Authority." Like many churches back then, LPCC was meant to be a place where Christianity would receive a clear moral education that would help them thrive in society. For many of the people who attended here, that meant getting ahead with well-paying white collar jobs downtown.

The church also helped those who were not thriving. From the beginning, the church gave money to the less fortunate, to those who were poor and sick. The women's groups raised money for and helped at places like the Scott Mission, Camp Scugog, and the CNIB. Money was raised for missionaries working in what is now Zimbabwe and Indigenous villages in Northern Manitoba. The church saw Christianity as a crucial tool for creating morally grounded adults to work in Canadian society, while helping those who could not thrive due to poverty, illness or ignorance of the Gospel.

Would Jesus have felt at home here? In today's scripture reading, we hear Jesus speaking in the temple in Jerusalem, a few days before he was arrested and killed. He has become very popular. He talks about a faith in God that clearly favours the poor and the marginalized. He has told people it is hard for rich people to get into heaven since they ignore the needs of the poor.

He has told his followers that if anyone wanted to follow him, they must break away from their families, leave their parents and siblings behind. And now, in today's scripture reading, he predicts the downfall of the temple itself, and a period of wars and famines before the coming of the Son of Man. He predicts that his followers will be arrested by society's leaders, some will be even be killed by them. And all of this will happen soon, in their lifetimes.

Jesus speaks this way often. He believes the world is going to end, and God will intervene to radically change society. The rich rulers would be deposed, the common people who followed God would be put in charge. There has always been a revolutionary fire in Christ's message, one that churches throughout the ages have tried to water down and push aside. Usually the solution has been to say that this time of fire and tribulation lies in the far off future. But Jesus obviously thought it was coming soon. He saw a deep tension between faith and society. He didn't expect his followers and society to get along.

And this poses a challenge for modern Christianity. How radical should our faith be? Are we called to fit into society, or to stand back, and call for change? On the personal level, we know that Jesus asks us to do many difficult things. Love our enemies. Turn the other cheek. Give to the poor, visit prisoners. Doing this as an individual is hard enough, but what if our entire society worked on these principles? Could we create a society that lived up to Christ's high moral ideals, where no one was poor, where everyone was housed and safe from violence?

Most churches in Canada in the 1950s and '60s chose to present Christianity as a moral code that could help people behave within society. Churches could be relied on to help those society hurt or ignored, the poor and needy, but society itself would not be asked to change much. But that approach became a liability starting in the 1960s. The desire for personal liberation for women, for gays, for Blacks, the peace movement - all of those calls for social change started outside mainline white churches. They demanded societal change, being a moral person was not enough.

Churches paid a heavy price for their reputation for conformism and traditional morality. Attendance dropped off. In the annual report for 1968, this church worried that something was seriously wrong with Sunday school. It no longer addressed the needs of a rapidly changing society. In 1974, a York University study suggested that women should be allowed to be in positions of power at LPCC. Ten years later, a task force was created to consider the future of the church. Dr Bradford would be retiring soon, so it was time to take stock. Attendance was declining, and sixty percent of the congregation was over 50 years old. A survey found that younger families found the services too traditional and unsatisfying. The church needed to change. The task force recommended that women should be considered when new ministers were hired. The minister should no longer be chair of council. The report argued that worship should "call us to issues of justice and open to reflect on life's issues in order to integrate the life and work of the community in worship."

Just a few years later, those tensions broke out into the open. The national church came out against the North American Free Trade agreement, a stance not welcomed by the Bay Street workers here. The national church also endorsed gay people in the pulpit and the pews, another

decision most of the congregation disagreed with. The Lawrence Park congregation found itself at odds with the values of national office, and many left in the years that followed. The congregation was declining, and people under fifty reported in surveys they found the services too stuffy and traditional. They voted with their feet, too.

In the 2000s, faced by declining numbers, this congregation decided to redesign the sanctuary. It was too big for the shrinking congregation. The new design cut it in half, and flipped it around. The pews were taken out, replaced by moveable chairs. The shape of the sanctuary was made more round.

This was a wise decision on many levels. Rev. Bill Kervin said you can't fight the room, but you can go with it. This sanctuary is open to the world. We have a glass wall looking out on nature. Our back wall is also glass, so anyone, all week long, can see where we worship. We are not hiding behind dark walls. The long rows of pews are gone, replaced by a wrap around seating arrangement which is flexible. We have ramps so the entire space is accessible to people in wheelchairs. This room says we are open to new ideas, to all people, to nature and humanity alike. We also use this entire building better. We rent to groups of all kinds in the community - schools, choirs, recitals. We are a community centre and a church.

That openness has led to a very different kind of church life. We've had ministers before me who have expressed doubts about God and the divinity of Jesus. There's room here for that. Behind the pulpit and in the congregation. There are ministers like myself who believe in the Trinity, and who seek to connect Jesus' radical message of love with our world today. And most importantly, there is you, the congregants. You are not here because you have to be. No one at your work or in the neighbourhood expects you to be here. You come because you want to be here. To hear the music, to be in community, to hear the message and scripture. You are here because you feel fed here.

The founders of this church wanted a place where all people in the community could feel welcome. We have expanded on that vision so that anyone from anywhere can attend, on Zoom, or in person. Our definition of community has broadened, to include everyone who thirsts for love, community, spirituality and justice. We continue the work of helping those who suffer in society. We have spent this week getting an apartment ready for a family of refugees we have sponsored and who will arrive later this week. This is important work, as it has always been.

But we now also ask why people are poor and marginalized. Jesus didn't expect his followers to easily fit into society. His disciples are asked to call out society for its failure to treat everyone with dignity. Our church has matured, adding a desire for justice to its willingness to help those who suffer. Jesus asks us to call out society for its failures. Why are borders being closed to refugees? Why are books being banned? Why are so many people homeless in a city with thousands of empty condos? We are called to speak out, not just to fit in.

Christ calls for us to love God, and share God's love in a way that can help us and others thrive. We are called to be good people, as the founders of this church knew. And we are also called to work with God to make our society more fair, more just, more compassionate. That is a

message that will always meet resistance. But Jesus told us not to fear - God will give us the words to speak when we face conflict. May God's love give us the consolation and courage we need to live a good life, for ourselves and others for another eighty years or more here at Lawrence Park Community Church. Amen.