

The Arts Ministry

James Bay United Church has become a hub for performers and artists ... and audiences, too.

By David Lennam



GORDON MILLER

A church not only brings people together, it enlivens their spirituality. For James Bay United Church, that means creating a new, alternate congregation by catering to those whose worship might be inclined as much toward the arts as it is to divinity.

Local jazz drummer and composer Kelby MacNayr is in charge of the church's arts ministry — co-ordinating concerts, workshops and classes appealing to a wide variety of interests as well as providing artists with a space to do their thing.

The church has played host to regular Tuesday night jazz concerts and Monday night guitar jams with Aaron Watson of Cold Cut Combo, as well as numerous one-off gigs (an Afro-Cuban jazz afternoon on New Year's Eve, for instance). There are also classes in movement with one of the nation's premier modern dancers, Grace Miyagawa; sound healing with fado vocalist Sara Marreiros; and swing-dance lessons and performances featuring live musicians such as Lloyd Arntzen, Daniel Lapp, Al Pease, Toni Blodgett and Tony Genge. There's even ongoing tai chi.

This spring MacNayr hopes to bring in

the vocalist, pianist, composer and arranger Louise Rose for a jazz vocals master class, and is organizing author readings, visual and performing arts talks and songwriter-in-the-round evenings.

Anne Schaefer returns with her *Awakening the Spirit Through Music* encounters. The Victoria singer-songwriter understands the symmetry between building community through arts or through faith.

"That energy and intention of people who go there to worship in some sort of service are bringing out that kind of community-mindedness," she says. "There are many ways to pray, celebrate life and create community. The arts, to me, are a really high form of spirituality. Deep from the heart and the soul."

While these events are neither religious nor secular gatherings, they speak to a place somewhere in between. It might be fair to say playing music, learning to dance or practising tai chi taps into a spirituality that doesn't need to be defined by any particular theology.

"The end result of the arts," MacNayr says, "is a

spiritual endeavour for the practitioner. When it's really beautiful there's something that's uplifting to your spirit."

The approach MacNayr is taking was initially developed by Gordon Miller six years ago. A musician, Miller understood that intentional programming — the arts, for example — would ignite interest from the community and provide a deeper connection of sorts.

"Our focus was not on generating new energy or putting new people in the building," he says. "Our job was to create a space to nurture people's spirits."

Miller had the full support of then-minister Rev. Karen Dickey, who retired last summer.

"It turned out to also be a way of people coming inside these [church] walls who had never got in the door," says Dickey. "The church, as a home for the arts, I don't think is anything new. Maybe we're just reimagining the ways that could happen."

All events at James Bay United are priced by donation or inexpensive enough that no one should be excluded.