

Knox Stratford Creates Bold Opportunity

Written by Bob Verdun, Member of Knox Stratford & Submitted by the Session of Knox Stratford

A church is the congregation, not the building in which we gather. That article of faith is being fully put to the test by the members of Knox Presbyterian Church in Stratford, Ontario, who voted overwhelmingly to sell our entire property and use the funds to rebuild our ministry to our community without either the aura or the burden of owning our heritage building.

Our congregation is now formally beginning the search for a dynamic leader who is keen to minister to the people and visitors of a small city known to the world for its prowess in dramatic communication. This is an inspirational opening for a candidate with vision and purpose to rebuild a congregation for today's challenges and opportunities – well backed by a solid financial foundation.

All Christians understand that we are practicing our faith wherever we meet, which makes ownership of a meetinghouse non-essential. Fortunately, for the next decade at least, Knox Stratford will continue to worship in what had been our exclusive sanctuary. However, it is now owned by a visionary developer and boldly shared with more than a dozen local arts organizations. Our congregation is the leading tenant, blessed with very favourable terms for this next decade of rebuilding.

Major changes will be made to the sanctuary, but it will continue to host one of the finest pipe organs in Canada. Pews will make way for more comfortable seating, and substantial improvements will be made to accessibility, washrooms, sound equipment, and lighting.

Signage will change, but this fortress of faith will continue to be a dominant landmark that boldly proclaims the historic character of Stratford's main street.

All of this is a greater blessing than was anticipated when our congregation faced the hard reality that we were quickly exhausting our reserve funds and no longer able to pay a full-time minister or maintain our building. At least two other heritage churches in the heart of Stratford have already fallen to the wrecker's ball, so we were determined to preserve our prominent physical embodiment of more than 175 years of Presbyterian witness in Stratford.

Four years of serious study, consultation, and negotiation by our appointed Task Group produced a generous offer from a locally-active developer who has deep Christian roots. His commitment to preserve the prominent architectural features will assist in his negotiations with the City of Stratford for a new development on the rear portion of the congregation's property.

The developer will also benefit from the strong support of the community's arts organizations. A key part of our plan arose from the Task Group nurturing a meaningful relationship with the Stratford Arts and Culture Collective, an umbrella organization for the groups who need a suitable location for their myriad

types of performances. (The Stratford Festival's world-class theatres have very limited availability as well as very high rental costs.)

The developer has paid the Knox congregation the full-appraised value of our property. The congregation is investing the funds to ensure we can properly support a full-time minister while we also revitalize and expand our community programs, such as supporting the Stratford Connection Centre with lunches, and especially our Cancer Care mission that provides wigs and head accessories to patients from Southwestern Ontario.

Our focus will include ministerial outreach to the unique cohorts in the local population. There are growing numbers of theatre-lovers who have retired to Stratford and are looking for more than theatre to enrich their lives year-round. Increasing ranks of professional artists are making their home base in Stratford, and they are also interested in a deeper form of community involvement, especially the performers and theatre craft workers who have young children.

As Knox becomes a thriving centre of artistic inter-action and performance, it will be an ideal setting to share the Good News of the greatest story of all time.

