

It Was Like This...

ESSAYS ON THE DAYS OF GRACE



A Grace Notes Supplement as part of the
50th Anniversary Celebrations
of Grace United Church
Sarnia, Ontario

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From the editors:

There were 171 Charter Members on roll at the beginning of Grace in 1956. One of them was Clint Sykes who has been part of, or witnessed, our story to date. He was Congregational Secretary and Recording Steward of the Official Board for the first 31 years, a tenor in the choir for all 50, an Elder and Sunday School teacher. He is still active in committee work. We asked him to go down memory lane and remind us of our roots and up-bringing. These are his recollections.

Maxine, Marnie and Julie



Clint Sykes & Rev Charles Scott

The following essay was written by Clint Sykes in 2006

IT WAS LIKE THIS.....

ESSAYS ON THE DAYS OF GRACE

I begin by saying that Grace United was following God's will for his people here at Indian and Cathcart long before we articulated it in our Vision Statement. The third sentence reads: "We welcome challenges, confident that God will guide us." For me, this is the soul of Grace United here in Sarnia.

"Count your many blessings, count them one by one, and you will be surprised at what the Lord has done." There is much evidence of this in what follows.

ROOTS

Presbytery's suburban reach for the United Church in the North end in the early 1950's, in which Grace played a major role, was not without sacrifice by those churches with historic roots in prewar Sarnia.

As a player in the formation of Grace in 1956, I was deeply conscious of the impact particularly on St. Paul's, Devine and Central United Churches. Even Dunlop United was affected. I myself was a member of newly-established Dunlop which also lost several families to the northern movement of our church in Sarnia. I say "lost" hesitatingly because I believe that the pain endured was more than offset by the gains secured through new enthusiasm for Christ's mission.

We at Grace do well to salute and be grateful to all those who moved on to sink new roots. At the same time, we salute and are grateful to the many folks in the existing churches who quickly filled in to sustain their ministries.

We also recall with affection and gratitude the special parts played in Grace's formation and early development by Rev. Charles Scott of St. Paul's, Lambton Presbytery appointee, and by Rev. Glen Eagle, our first resident minister (1957-1964).

PROVIDENCE

Lambton Presbytery's foresight in the 1950's lay behind its purchase of three lots for church development at the corner of Indian and Cathcart. The cost was \$14,000. This was seed spending for the eventual rise of Grace, literally out of the bullrushes.

Low and undrained land at the time, there were rushes to be seen. I picture Marg Anderson seated at a pedal pump-organ playing music for the hymns we sang at the sod-turning for the first phase building of a chapel in 1959. It is not clear whether or not she was wearing rubber boots!

But the early planners thought big, and before long the newly-constituted church has assembled over three acres of land, at low cost, which would be needed for a growing north-end population, and as it turned out, one that also stretched eastward. Providentially too, we took advantage of the high water table to think in terms of one level as opposed to bi-level construction traditional with churches at that time. This lined up well with a three-phase building development which would meet the needs of the Grace family as its numbers grew.

Our first building was a National Housing Act-financed manse on Lori Ave. These were still the days when ministers were attracted by church-owned housing. Our contemporary, modern manse was written up in the U.C. Observer as a model for the housing of ministers and their families.

.....AND SERENDIPITY

By virtue of a one level plan of development, we provided, right from the start, handicap access to the premises. Mandated provision was to come along later. And when manses became "old-hat" with the emergence of a ministry trend to building equity through home ownership, Grace was able to support an outreach project for Community Living in Sarnia through use of the vacated manse as rent-free housing for its client people. This outreach still flourishes.

YOUTH

At the start, Grace was caught up in two compelling trends -- the demographics of post-war and the changing geography of Sarnia: lots of children to care for because of the baby boom, and the burgeoning of the residential North end.

Cite the statistics and we find there were 40 young ones in Sunday School at our first service in Errol Rd. School on Oct. 28th, 1956, 24 baptisms in our first year, 37 in 1958 and 61 in 1959! At the time of opening the C.E. Wing in 1964, we provided Sunday School for 655, including teachers, and our mid-week/Sunday programs for youth and adults alike served a total membership of 463 persons.

Indeed, by 1964 there were 20 organizations in operation not including official committees of the church. So, when a decision was needed re proceeding into Phase II of the building plans -- whether a C.E. Wing or a Sanctuary would be built --the former was certain to win out, as it did. We were not, however, without strong pressure from those who sought permanent worship facilities, moving on from the temporary extended-chapel arrangement which was the configuration in Phase I.

We still see evidence of very strong Grace commitment to spiritual development and leadership among the youth. The numbers are now understandably down, but the quality of the effort remains excellent and reflects a response to contemporary styles and needs. The leadership, programming and youth participation at Grace today is arguably one of the most recognized and effective in Presbytery, and even beyond. The Grace model is widely respected, to the point where our leaders are helping other churches in youth programming. This is truly a worthy mission effort.

"THE GURD STREET GANG"

In the pulpit bible in the Chapel, there are the names of three couples who placed it there. These six, and there were others, all resided on Gurd Street at the time and were lovingly referred to as "The Gurd Street Gang."

Why? They were a clutch of spirited, results-oriented people typical of the enthusiasm shown by many in those early days at Grace. I think of their counterparts today. They sit in the pews each Sunday. And we've witnessed in the more recent 25 years another dedicated group -- over 100 men and women of Grace -- who were participants in the Sarnia Cursillo Movement. Many are among our lay leaders today, to Grace's great benefit.

TRYING NEW THINGS

The 50 year history of Grace speaks to the response of the charter members, and then of the steady flow of newcomers, to the challenges we refer to in our Vision Statement.

Maybe unknowingly, but certainly in response to God's will and calling, we have been doing innovative things. Here are some that stand out:

- The Unified Budget, to be referred to later.
- Among the early A.O.T.S. charters granted in Eastern Canada [c. early 1960's].
- Introduced the first recycling program in Sarnia, in 1977, decades before the Blue Box.
- Conducted the first Fall Fair by a church in Sarnia [c. 1978]. Still going strong.
- Played a leadership role among churches in sponsoring Refugee Families.
- Adopted the Council structure of congregational governance, integrating spiritual emphasis and enthusiasm with overall Grace operations.
- Introduced Small Group Ministry as a comfortable style of Christian association in the 21st. century.
- Brought new expressions of Christian worship to all through the arts; a widely-praised venture in new expressions of faith. Have you been a member of a "pod"? Try it.

"THE ANNUAL MEETING"

As in most churches, Congregational meetings today at Grace challenge our Council to try every kind of format to gain interest and attendance. It was anything but that in the old days. The tradition was to start at 8:00 PM, the attendance was high and the format was all business. And we sometimes adjourned the next morning! To wit: Jan. 21/59, 12:15 AM; Jan 28/60, 12:10 AM. At the latter meeting there was a motion to speed things up. Our answer was to split the meeting over two Sundays. Bad call! In Jan./61, Part I went from 8:00 PM to 10:00 PM, Part II from 8:00 PM to 11:15 PM, a total of 5 hrs. 15 mins. In 1962 it was worse, a total of 6 hrs. 5 mins.!

All this in spite of having present a real mover and shaker, Meredith Orr, who kept things going. I've taken a random sample of 36 motions over eight early meetings. He moved 15 of them! Incidentally, he also moved the very final motion in January, 1957 which named the new church "Grace". Ahead of this, there were 18 names proposed and two run-off ballots. The finalists were Grace, St. James and St. Marks, out of which Grace was unanimously chosen.

THE LAUGHING CHRIST

My personal favourite of the many portraits of the Master is the one in which His face is lightened with smile. He was to endure trial, hate and abuse, so I'm sure He often had reason to be pleased with those who followed in His way. And He would grin. I've noted that Grace people have through the years used a lot of humour in and out of the rough spots.

There is even an official record of two instances. In one, our leading Grace punster, then Clerk of Session Ken Plumley, he of the famous "Plumleyism", who as Chair of one Annual Meeting suggested we thank the UCW ladies for the dinner preparations by stacking the tables and chairs. He declared that "all able-bodied men should motion the tables!" At another, in 1962, Darlene Chitovas brought back from Presbytery that a story was going around claiming "the United Church is for the birds!" The Grace minutes state: "It was the consensus among several in the congregation that only an Eagle could appreciate the story," referring to Rev. Glen, our minister at the time.

THE CHURCH BEYOND

I think of Grace as a church deeply concerned about the world beyond Indian and Cathcart. At the start, building a new congregation meant heavy spending on ourselves for facilities, staff and programs. But from the outset we committed to what were called "Missions" then, and now more broadly labelled as "Outreach". First was the Unified Budget [UB] concept, new to the United Church [UC] and likely other denominations, in which we set a minimum gift to Missions from the whole congregation. We've honoured the UB for all 50 years by guaranteeing a minimum at

each annual meeting. The UC General Council picked up on the concept and recommended its use right across the church.

Still heavily in debt at the time of a national UC appeal, its "Vision in Mission" [1984], we contributed some \$70,000. Again, when designing our "Reach for the Star" project in 1987 to enable Grace to proceed with the Sanctuary, we honoured M&S by tripling the level of our yearly guarantee. This was but one of the five thrusts for special funding. We did not, however, reach the capital goal needed to build a suitable Sanctuary and it was to be 12 years later that this dream would be realized.

Currently synonymous with Outreach at Grace are the devoted efforts of the Caregivers, those involved in soup luncheons to support agencies and causes in the community and beyond, and the volunteers who assist at the Inn of the Good Shepherd, Meals on Wheels, Rayjohn awareness trips, etc.

....AND SOMETIMES A NEW HOME

It is almost a tradition at Grace to be involved in providing new homes for others. I've mentioned the current use of the manse by Community Living people. Also, quite a few of our members have taken part in builds for Habitat for Humanity.

And much earlier we were leading sponsors in this area of four refugee families from Vietnam and Central America. We don't think of these sponsorships without praising the dedication and leadership of Maxine Ellis in this outreach cause.

"MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE" -- Psalm 100

Visitors often remark that we are a singing congregation. At times they have added "swinging"! But unmistakably, music has always played a central role in the culture of Grace.

At the first service at Errol Rd. school on October 28th, 1956, half a dozen men and women came to the front of the auditorium to support the hymn singing; an instant choir that was one of the two groups first to be formalized in the new congregation, the other being the Sunday School, which swung into action in an adjacent school room.

We look back on the four decades which preceded the building of the Sanctuary and gratefully acknowledge the tremendous dedication of the succession of organists/choir directors, and the choirs of all ages which they led, as they struggled with the sheer physics of giving musical leadership. We remember (and are now happy to forget) the frustrations among presenters and congregation alike associated with the combined Chapel/Church Parlour (now Room 1) arrangement for Sunday services. We managed seating for 300 or more, but not without inconvenience and sacrifice.

Worshipping today in the surroundings of a beautiful Sanctuary, many will recall the early problems of acoustics, the visual barriers, the trials in placements of the choirs, and the lack of a sense of unity in worship. The search for solutions was constant. But to the credit of all concerned, music in the church has been evolving in excellence and in congregational participation. We see it today as truly a vehicle for celebration, joyous, exciting and closely integrated with service themes in its contemporary and traditional forms.

DISTAFF

The women of Grace have been the backbone in our growing tall as a church. From the beginning they were organized as a Women's Association [W.A.]. By 1971 they had a membership of 86 organized by then in units under the U.C.W. banner.

Their contribution to Grace life is only too familiar, as even today they are still seen in the kitchens, occupying leadership roles on committees, studying the Word, seeing to contact with the elderly and care-giving to all ages where there is need for support. I have a lot of vivid memories of cheerful ladies' voices emanating from open doors in parts of the church, sometimes even raucous but always filling the air with busy joy. I think to myself this isn't noise. It's the spirit at work.

SYMBOLS

There are reminders of our heritage in symbols around the church. The first, of course, is the church itself, to denote our presence and witness in the community. The "Wayside Pulpit" at the corner makes people aware of some of our activities.

There are the three cornerstones dated 1959, 1964 and 1998 marking the three-stage development of the church structure. And in the narthex, a glass-faced cabinet houses the shovel and trowel used in the several sod-turning and foundation stone laying ceremonies associated with our growing presence on the site.

Then, there are the memorial windows. The four Saints in the Chapel, dedicated to Ed Heath. And the Christ figure in the Chapel south peak, in memory of Bill Parker, Tom Murray, Ted Dunfield, George Taylor and Alvin Sims. Finally, the communion theme window atop the Sanctuary north wall.

I recall the acquisition of our first church bell. Without ceremony, Rev. Glen Eagle, our first full-time minister, appeared one day with a CNR locomotive bell which he smilingly described as "donated" to us through the generosity of the railway employees. We knew Glen to be a great persuader, so there was no discussion! The bell hung under the peak of the eave at the north end of the Chapel. It was rung each Sunday ahead of service by the pulling on a connecting rope by custodian Bill Parker who literally climbed into the balcony above the rear of the Chapel. The bell

now resides in a secret spot in the church known only to Bob Forsyth. Ask him about it!

There are unseen symbols as well. Such as a silver wrist-watch owned by Frank Scott-Pearce which was lost in a property clean-up event making way for the manse construction on Lori Ave. The watch is under there somewhere.

And also a mounted wrought-iron piece depicting the official symbol of the United Church, created by Lorne Longley and Earl Thompson which stood at the end of the manse driveway, but now long since removed.

TREASURE

Today Grace families are regularly challenged to be good stewards of God's grace. Do the three "T's" sound familiar? The dedication of our time, talent and treasure? For me, this is the best yet as an expression of focus for any Christian looking for guidance in all of life. All are vital and mutually supporting.

In thinking back, I believe something should be said about one of the triad, treasure. The thing the church seems always to be seeking. A thing which helped Grace grow and survive.

I've take an active part in every stewardship drive for funds at Grace. Here are some thoughts that emerge. They have helped me personally to address the question of sacrificial giving.

- The concept of the half-tithe. The early members of Grace were encouraged to reach up to this level of commitment, and many strove to do just this as they were able. We made it easy to plan for it -- a goal of one dollar a week for every \$1,000 of annual income.
- Remember Jesus' teaching in His story of the widow's mite. At Grace, we reflected this by stressing the theme of "Not Equal Gifts, But Equal Sacrifice."
- Money is a store of value earned through toil. God enables us to earn it and it is a holy act when we return some of it to Him each Sunday.
- Most of us [perhaps all] have a conscience. Bothersome at times. But there's a way to test our fealty to Christ. Give until it doesn't hurt anymore.

* * *

Statement Of Purpose

In response to God's call and in accordance with His plan, the purpose of Grace United Church is to be a community of faith and love, celebrating His presence and forgiveness and united in using His spiritual gifts to draw all people to Him; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Our Vision

God's grace shines in our celebrating people. We grow in faith together and share our love of Jesus Christ. We welcome challenges, confident that God will guide us.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Through these recollections, I've clearly been made aware of the many blessings God has showered on us at Grace. To cherish and keep alive our inheritance, I believe we might follow these imperatives:

- An alertness to new ways, and a steady vision of the direction God is asking us to follow in a fast-changing world.
Discernment
- A strong faith that in what we try, we will be successful. God will sustain us.
Dependence
- A programming style of Sunday thoughts and through-the-week activities that build on the beliefs and strengths of all Grace folks, young and older.
Diversity
- A faith in Grace's leadership; that people among us will continue to emerge, even in unexpected places, and carry the day through trial as well as triumph.
Devotion

