

BIRCHCLIFF BLUFFS UNITED CHURCH

Our Living Faith Story

The Foundation of Our Faith

A Song of Faith (219 – 230)

*We sing of God's good news lived out,
A church with purpose:
 faith nurtured and hearts comforted,
 gifts shared for the good of all,
 resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,
 fierce love in the face of violence,
 human dignity defended,
 members of a community held and inspired by God,
 corrected and comforted,
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,
creation's mending,
We sing of God's mission.*

Our Vision and Mission Statement

We at Birchcliff Bluffs United Church are a progressive and outreaching Christian community within The United Church of Canada.

We reach out as Jesus taught us with a love without borders. We embrace all those of differing abilities, ages, races, religious and/or ethnic heritages, gender identities, sexual orientations, genders, economic status, and cultural backgrounds into the membership, ministry, leadership, and life of this congregation.

To achieve our vision we commit ourselves to:

- *Growing in our faith through worship, scripture, study, music, and joyous celebration.*
- *Becoming an affirming ministries centre for the Scarborough and East Toronto communities through the ongoing support and expansion of our affirming ministry programs.*
- *Actively reaching out to support those in need locally and globally.*
- *Being open to the guidance of the Spirit as we seek ways to share our faith and speak courageously of it.*

Living Our Faith

Birchcliff Bluffs United Church is a small, but very active, congregation, well known in our community as the home of the Bluffs Food Bank. Since being recognized as an affirming congregation in 2016, we have made a major commitment to becoming a centre for affirming ministries within The United Church of Canada through the establishment of our Toby's Place and Dorothy's Place programs and our engagement as refugee co-sponsors for two 2SLGBTQ+ refugees. While our affirming ministries have been a major focus for the past four years, we strive to live our faith in all aspects of our congregational life.

Our Life and Work and Ministry Profile

The following is a profile of our life and work as a congregation and our ministries and activities.

Worship

Worship services are the heart of our church congregation. Just as the human heart nourishes and provides energy to all parts of our body, our worship services provide the spiritual nourishment and sense of community that animate our congregation's ministries.

Our **Sunday worship services** are relatively informal and congregation members participate by welcoming attendees when they arrive, presenting the congregation's life and work, reading scripture, assisting with serving communion, etc. Some lay leaders are comfortable leading worship when needed. A worship workshop was held in the fall of 2019 to encourage lay members of the congregation to become more comfortable at participating in worship leadership. Communion is celebrated approximately once per month.

We generally follow the lectionary, using the scripture readings that are relevant to the sermon, with flexibility. Our worship services are central to our Church life as they provide the main opportunities for contact and community for the people in our congregation.

Our Minister normally leads worship and preaches three times each month. Worship leadership is also provided on occasion by a theology student completing a contextual education program at our Church and by our Dorothy's Place Program Coordinator. The traditional format of liturgies, scripture readings, a sermon, prayers, and hymns is usually followed, but the congregation is also open to experiencing other styles of worship, such as dialogues and special presentations and to youth and lay leadership.

The congregation finds sermons meaningful when they make scripture relevant to our daily lives and encourage us to think about our faith and how we live it. The expectation is that sermons will normally be about 15 to 20 minutes in length.

One worship service per month is a Music Service, led by our very accomplished Music Director, who often brings a guest musician to augment the music of our choir. The music is based on a different theme each month (Celtic for Robbie Burns Day, Gospel, Dixieland, Irish for St. Patrick's Day, Broadway hits, religious music that became Top 10 hits, music by Canadian composers, the music of Johnny Cash, etc.) Dance has also been featured in some services. Our Music Director provides liturgies and reflections relating to the theme. These services are popular with the congregation and draw some community members who do not normally attend our worship services.

Our choir practises on Thursday nights and Sunday mornings and sings at Sunday worship and special events. Students have been hired at times to support the choir members from the congregation. For accompaniment we have a high quality Yamaha Grand piano and an older electronic organ. Hymns are usually selected from Voices United and More Voices. The Music Services offer a much wider variety of musical selections, based on the theme of the service.

Our sanctuary is equipped with sound and projection systems, and we use PowerPoint to project our liturgies, words to hymns, and announcements onto a screen for our worship services.

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Faith Formation & Christian Education

Our goal in this area of ministry is to offer opportunities for spiritual growth and faith exploration for people of all ages in the congregation. We offer Nursery care, Sunday School programs for children, a newly formed youth group, adult faith formation programs, and a drama group (Shower Curtain Productions).

Sunday School programs: We offer Nursery care for a small group of toddlers and Sunday School classes for older children. Numbers fluctuate week to week, which presents a challenge to the lay leaders of the programs.

Youth Programs: Six youth participated in a comprehensive confirmation program in 2018, and five of them became full members of the congregation following the completion of the program. A **youth group** has recently been started by one of our lay volunteers, meeting on Saturday night once a month.

We are blessed with a small group of active teens who support our congregational life in various ways according to their skills and interests, including singing in the choir, staffing the Nursery, leading Sunday School classes, participating in our drama group, running the sound system, operating the elevator, and participating in special events. Over the past few years, three youth from our congregation have been awarded Baillie Volunteer Service Awards by The Toronto United Church Council for their service in our congregation.

Adult Programs: A six-session study group led by the Minister in the fall of 2019, which focused on some key Biblical characters, was well attended by 10 members of the congregation, with good, very positive feedback. This spring, some movie nights, followed by a time for discussion and fellowship, are being planned.

Shower Curtain Productions: Our drama group, Shower Curtain Productions, presents two productions each year, one on White Gift Sunday and one at Easter. Original scripts written by our Creative Director or other congregation members are performed, with participation by thespians of all ages. The productions typically involve 25 or more congregation members and offer thoughtful reflections on the themes through drama, music and art.

Pastoral Care

We have a small pastoral care team whose members keep in touch by phone and through visits with congregation members and adherents in assisted living facilities or who are sick, shut in, or facing crises. Cards are sent by our Pastoral Care Ministry Coordinator at Christmas and Easter to those who aren't able to attend church and to others when support is needed, such as times of illness or surgery, following a death of a family member, etc. Hope cards are sent to seniors and shut-ins twice a year to remind them that they are in the thoughts of the congregation, and birthdays are often remembered too, usually with a phone call.

Our Minister provides training and support to the team and, as time permits, makes visits to those in hospital and provides counselling to those in crisis.

Training in pastoral care was also provided to the members of our pastoral care team and other interested congregation members through a series of workshops led by our previous Minister.

Pastoral care is provided to participants in our Affirming Ministry programs through the Program Coordinators and our Minister in appropriate circumstances. This work requires sensitivity to the issues and concerns faced by youth and seniors who are members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Community Outreach & Social Justice

The goal of our Community Outreach and Social Justice ministries is to live out our faith in our community and establish our Church as a place of welcome, inclusivity, and support for those who feel marginalized. The major components of our outreach ministries are our Affirming Ministry Programs, our support of the Bluffs Food Bank, and operation of a thrift shop (Bluffs Boutique).

Our Outreach and Social Justice Ministries:

Affirming Ministries. We have made a major commitment to living out our faith as an affirming congregation through our Affirming Ministry Programs, ***Toby's Place***, ***Dorothy's Place***, and, most recently, ***refugee co-sponsorship*** with Jubilee United Church of two refugees who identify as 2SLGBTQ+. Toby's Place offers a drop-in dinner program for youth on Monday afternoons/evenings, and Dorothy's Place offers a drop-in lunch program for seniors on Mondays and a Rainbow Tea Time art and music program for older adults on Friday afternoons. All of these programs offer a safe(r) space where participants can be themselves and find friendship and a supportive community. Funded by grants from the United Church of Canada Foundation and other sources, fundraising events, and donations, these programs are led by part-time staff, and one-third of our Minister's time is allotted to supporting the programs. We are hoping to continue to expand these programs as finances permit.

Other Community Outreach:

The ***Bluffs Food Bank (BFB)*** (www.bluffsfoodbank.com), was established in 2003 by our Church and four other local churches (Anglican, Presbyterian, and two Baptist). BFB is housed in our Church building and serves a catchment area extending west to east from Victoria Park Avenue to Midland Avenue and north to south from St. Clair Avenue to Lake Ontario. It is now the largest food bank in Scarborough. It serves more than 300 families per week and is staffed by approximately 100 volunteers per week. It has permanent food storage space in the Church basement and uses the kitchen and basement hall on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to receive, organize, and prepare food and on Thursdays to serve clients. In addition to giving it a home, we support it through an annual fundraising event, donations from Church members, and volunteers who help staff it and provide leadership by serving on the Board of Directors.

The ***Bluffs Boutique***, a thrift shop offering gently-used clothing and other household items, is open during Food Bank hours (when it is staffed by Food Bank volunteers) and during Toby's Place and Dorothy's Place meeting times. It has raised more than \$10,000 in each of the past two years. We support a ***Foster Child*** with some of the funds from the Bluffs Boutique.

Our **neighbourhood** is undergoing major growth and change, with numerous condominium projects being built along Kingston Road and other local roads, replacing commercial strips and single-family housing. These changes will present both challenges and new opportunities for our outreach ministries.

Administration

Our goal in the area of **Administration** is to provide structure and leadership for our ministries that is facilitative and makes the best use of the skills, time, and energy of our staff and volunteers.

In 2019 a task group worked with consultants from The Toronto United Church Council to review our governance structure and make some recommendations to make our governance structures and operations more effective and improve communications. Those recommendations are being implemented during the current church year.

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Our **governing body** is a Church Board, comprised of our church officers and the coordinators of our various ministries. We also have a Steering Committee for our Affirming Ministry Programs that is chaired by our Minister and reports to the Church Board. Task groups are established to take on projects such as our refugee co-sponsorship and building rentals.

Our **staff** include our Minister of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care (30 hours per week), our Music Director, and our Church Administrator. Our Church Administrator staffs the Church office from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., Tuesdays to Fridays.

Our **Toby's Place** program is led by Joint Program Coordinators who each work 12.5 hours per week, and our **Dorothy's Place** program is led by a Program Coordinator who works 18 hours per week. The Dorothy's Place Program Coordinator is ordained as a Minister in the Metropolitan Community Church and is in the process of applying for admission to The United Church of Canada.

Our **Church building** is accessible for those with mobility limitations except for the third floor mezzanine (the old balcony), which is being rented. A ramp to the basement provides access to our lift, which opens into our main level Welcome Area. The only available parking is street parking and parking in a nearby laneway. **Caretaking** of the Church building is provided by dedicated volunteers.

Our **Church sanctuary** is a flexible space, with comfortable, upholstered chairs that can be reconfigured and a chancel in which the lectern, communion table, and baptismal font are all movable. The congregation uses the sanctuary for dances, concerts, plays, and other special events, reconfiguring it to suit the occasion. A Welcome Area with a kitchenette opens into the sanctuary and is used for coffee hour after worship services, as well as being rented for fitness programs, meetings, etc. The offices for the Minister, Church Administrator, and Music Director, the Sunday School rooms, and an all-gender accessible washroom surround the Welcome Area.

We have **sound and projection systems** in the sanctuary. The liturgies and words to the hymns are displayed on the screen during our worship services. PowerPoint slides are prepared by our Church Administrator using the materials provided by the Minister or presider. For musical accompaniment we have a high quality Yamaha Grand piano and an older electronic organ.

The congregation has a **website** and uses Facebook and other **social media** to publicize its ministries, programs and activities. The Minister and others provide content, and the Church Administrator makes changes and updates as required.

Financially, we struggle each year to achieve a balanced budget. This past year (2019) we had a deficit but in 2018 we achieved a small surplus, and we have no debt. Our stewardship energies for the past few years have been primarily directed at obtaining grants and other funding for our Toby's Place and Dorothy's Place ministries. We also lost some renters in 2019, resulting in a drop in rental income, but replacements are being found. We were assisted by an increase, beginning in July, in the monthly rent paid by the Bluffs Food Bank.

Like most United Church congregations, some older members who were significant donors have died during the past few years, but we have been very fortunate in having a number of new members join us over the same period who are supporting our congregation financially as they are able. We are encouraged that some new adherents have recently requested envelopes, as well as becoming involved in our Church's community life.

Our rental income is lower than that of most Toronto United Church congregations, mainly because our first priority has been making our space available for our ministry programs. With guidance from TUCC, we are currently focusing on increasing our rental income to achieve greater financial stability.

Our congregation was formed by the amalgamation on November 30, 2003, of two pre-union congregations, Birchcliff Heights which was founded in 1916 and Birch Cliff which was founded in 1919. Finances have always been a challenge for both congregations, but, like its predecessor congregations, our congregation lives in faith that by continuing to stretch and grow our ministries, we will find ways to meet our congregation's financial needs so that we can continue to offer faithful ministry to our community.

Denomination & Communities

As a congregation, we seek to build and strengthen connections within our denomination and in our local community. Through our outreach programs, relationships have been established with many organizations engaged in support for members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Our Regional Council lay representative serves on the Regional Council Pastoral Relations Commission and the UCC Manual Committee, and our Minister serves on the Regional Council Equity Committee and as a Regional Council Liaison for Pastoral Relations work.

Since joining us early in 2019, our Minister has worked to strengthen relationships with other United Churches and churches of other denominations in Scarborough and East Toronto. A joint worship service for all the Scarborough United Churches is being held on March 1, 2020, and we are joining with some other Scarborough United Churches for Easter services.

We have partnered with Jubilee United Church to co-sponsor two refugees from Kenya who were referred to The United Church of Canada by UNHCR.

Our Minister and the Dorothy's Place Program Coordinator have been making presentations about our Affirming Ministry Programs at other Toronto United Churches, helping increase knowledge and support of the Programs and to encourage other churches to expand their outreach ministries. They and the Toby's Place Program Coordinators are actively engaged in East Side Pride, and members of our congregation participated in the 2019 Toronto Pride Parade.

Dorothy's Place has developed partnerships with Re kai Centres, Senior Pride Network, 519, Egale Canada and its National Seniors Advisory Council, and other organizations. Toby's Place staff attend Pride events at colleges and universities and have helped organize and present workshops at various conferences and events, including Egale conference, Affirm United Conference, Skylight Festival, LGBTQ+ Community Day, and TDSB EnVision conference.

As mentioned under the Community Outreach & Social Justice heading, our congregation joined with four churches of other denominations in our community in 2003 to establish the Bluffs Food Bank. All of those churches continue to support the food bank, and other United Churches in Scarborough also offer financial and volunteer support. We have built good relationships with our local City Councillor, MPP, and MP and are known in our community as an outreaching Church.

Leadership

Our goal is to share leadership among our paid staff and the lay people in our congregation and to offer opportunities for people of all ages in our congregation to develop their leadership skills and to share in the leadership of our ministries.

The leadership skills and qualities we are seeking in our Minister are:

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- the knowledge, sensitivity, and skill to provide leadership and support for our Affirming Ministry programs,
- excellent preaching skills,
- the willingness to work collaboratively with our Music Director and have our Music Director lead a music service once a month,
- the ability to offer pastoral care to people who may be in vulnerable life situations in a sensitive manner,
- the ability to seek and build consensus and to identify and address conflicts when they arise,
- collegial, collaborative, and skilled at encouraging lay involvement and having the ability to prioritize and delegate responsibilities when appropriate,
- comfortable with appropriate use of social media, and
- a good sense of humour.

Our congregational leadership is stretched by the ambitious Affirming Ministry programs to which we have made a commitment. While program leadership is provided by staff, the congregation's leaders prepare grant applications and grant reports, assist with fundraising events and activities, and manage the complicated financial arrangements involved in tracking the program expenses and use of the grant funds. We rely on our Minister for overall program leadership and coordination and have allocated one third of the Minister's time to this work.

While the congregation responds well to requests to support and participate in our congregational activities, the leadership group is relatively small and spread thin, with some people wearing too many hats. We have been fortunate that some newer members have been taking on leadership responsibilities in some areas of our Church life, but continued development of new leadership will be needed to sustain and grow our ambitious ministry programs.

Self-Care

Our congregation leaders are sensitive to the needs of our staff for time off for family crises, illness, etc., and encourage them to engage in self-care practices. We also try to support each other and other congregation members in times of illness, family crises, etc. We are currently working on strengthening our Ministry & Personnel Committee in order to provide better support to our staff.

The health and wellness and the spiritual growth of our Minister are very important to us, and we encourage our Minister to take all vacation time and use study leave opportunities to foster spiritual growth.

We are striving to become more intentional about creating opportunities for our congregation to get together for fun and social time, but it has been a challenge to do this because of the time demands of our other congregational activities. Our summer barbecue, weekly coffee hours following our worship services, Shrove Tuesday pancake suppers, and the movie nights planned for this spring provide opportunities for the congregation to get to know each other and have fun.

Our faith formation program last fall also provided good opportunities for participants to get to know each other better and to learn from each other through discussions about our faith and spirituality.

The members of our quilting group provide mutual support to each other and welcome and encourage new participants.

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Looking to the Future

A Song of Faith (199 – 207)

We sing of a church

*seeking to continue the story of Jesus
by embodying Christ's presence in the world.*

We are called together by Christ

*as a community of broken but hopeful believers,
loving what he loved,
living what he taught,
striving to be faithful servants of God
in our time and place.*