

Long Reach United A Peninsula Gathering Place

by Jane Barry, The Greater Saint John Community Foundation

It's a very rare experience to try the door of a church these days and find it unlocked, especially when there is no one to be seen and no service is scheduled. But the trusting country tradition of the Kingston Peninsula prevails and at Long Reach United Church, all are welcome anytime. It is more than a place of worship for the local congregation and serves as a gathering place for the entire community, a role it has filled since the 1790's beginning with the Methodists, who erected the present structure in 1843. A plaque records its lineage.

The vintage structure has stood the test of time, from its awe-inspiring vantage point overlooking the St. John River, surrounded by an historic cemetery and lovingly cared for by generations of resourceful, caring and hardy Peninsula families. The interior woodwork is attractive and original. For some time the church members have aspired to modern washroom facilities, a place to gather and socialize and an all-purpose-type room to accommodate modest food service.

A Visions Committee was struck in 2005 composed of Rodney Kilpatrick, Anne Carvell, Frances Collins, Charles Holder, Joan Small, and Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Stevenson, their minister, to investigate the possibility of renovations and an addition to serve the spiritual needs of today's community. The mission of the vision team was to create an area with accessibility for all ages and for all stages of mobility in three phases. Work commenced in 2008 with costs estimated to be about \$60,000, a daunting amount for a small rural congregation.

Improvements to the parking area were completed in phase one and renewed foundation work under the original building in phase two. All this was carried out with mainly volunteer labour and various community fund-raising efforts. "In a world that often focuses on individualism, it was an incredible sight to see more than a dozen volunteers gathered joyfully on one of the coldest days of the winter trying to make a difference in our world. It restores ones faith in humanity" states Rev. Stevenson . The final phase is the most costly and is partially completed, thanks to support from the United Church of Canada's Mission & Service Fund and the Greater Saint John Community Foundation. In 2011, the hope is to drill a well and finish the interior of the new addition, which is serviceable and being utilized already. Access is much improved.

The Church serves community needs, hosting such events as the 100 mile dinner, which emphasizes how well one can eat with locally produced food, served as only it can be in a country setting. This fall's community repast will take place in the form of a take-home meal. "We continue to host musical and dramatic events" says Joan Small of the Visions Committee. "We are very proud of our achievements to date. We have preserved the heritage building and we will provide the Long Reach community with a comfortable and versatile building to address our spiritual needs", she adds.

Frances Collins has extensive knowledge of the church's history. One tradition is the annual "Flower Service", which is attended and supported locally and by many far removed from "the Reach". It is a memorial service for deceased church members and their loved ones and a cherished event, dating back fifty years. "Families bring flowers for the service. The event commemorates the significance of life and prayer for all, symbolizing with flowers that life is precious, abundant and beautiful" says Joan Small. A large arrangement, created from floral contributions from the congregation is created by Rev. Stevenson as the names of loved ones are remembered. At the end of the service the bouquet and other tributes are placed in the cemetery or given to a shut-in or a family in need of a spiritual gift. The Long Reach Singers present a selection, guest musicians and speakers and a reception round out the much-appreciated memorial. "The service is a positive, upbeat experience with expression of many emotions including joy, sadness and thanksgiving for lives lived" she concludes. More than one hundred attended this year.

Rev. Elizabeth, as she is called by her congregation, is a busy minister with duties at three churches which comprise the Two Rivers Pastoral Charge (including Bayswater-Summerville and Grand Bay-Westfield United Churches). In her 10th year, the PEI native is a popular clergywoman with all ages and an inspiration to her flock. She admires the resilience and generous spirit of all three congregations she serves " I live and work amid a wonderful eclectic mix of families and history. We laugh and we cry together. I serve a community who live with a spirit of gracious generosity and a stubborn tenacity to celebrate life. ... with the hope of leaving the world a better place" she concludes. To have continued since 1843, there is no doubt the Long Reach congregation have the commitment and loyalty to their faith and community to carry them through this latest project.



Photo: Joan Small (2nd from left) is a member of Long Reach United Church's Vision Committee which is overseeing renovations to the historic community church and gathering place and received support from the Greater Saint John Community Foundation, represented by Cheryl Robertson, Chair, (2nd from right) Sara Mudge, Secretary (far left) and Danny Jardine Grants Committee Chair(far right).



The doors at the Long Reach United Church are open to all at anytime.

Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca