

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – COMMUNITY PROFILE OUR LIVING FAITH STORY

A Short History

The Faith Story of Fonthill United Church begins in 1842 when a Methodist mission conducted ‘class meetings’ in people’s homes. It took until 1858 to form a congregation and to purchase a church building, a simple wood frame structure that was used until 1937. At Church Union in 1925, Fonthill Wesleyan Methodist Church became Fonthill United Church and twelve years later, a new brick church was erected. Fruit farming was originally the economic basis for Pelham Township but during the baby-boom years, Fonthill became a residential community and in 1958, a wing was added to the building featuring a gymnasium, lower hall and kitchen. For many years thereafter, church life centered on programs for youth and children. Two Sunday services were necessary in order to accommodate the congregation for worship.

In 1991, the congregation expanded the building again. A new chancel was added to the sanctuary to hold a large choir and the pews were turned around, making space so that the whole congregation could worship at the same time. Office space was added below the chancel. The expansion included a large open narthex with a handicap accessible elevator. In addition to the building expansion, the adjacent property was purchased and made into a parking lot. This expansion left the congregation with considerable debt but after many fundraising events, the debt was eventually paid off.

Fonthill United Church has had stable ministry. In the past 35 years, the congregation has called only four ordained ministers: Rev Dr. Gordon Crossfield from 1988-94, Rev Frank Walker from 1995-2004, Rev Dr. Garry van Bruchem from 2006-2020, and Rev Robert Lawson from 2020-current.

The Fonthill community has become a residential retirement community and the congregation reflects that demographic. The youth and children’s programs gave way to the focus on: pastoral care of the aging; adult theological education; and outreach and mission in the denomination, the local community and the world. Thus the Faith Story of Fonthill United Church was in large part shaped by the changes in Canadian society and by the changes in the Fonthill community. Having celebrated its 175th anniversary, the congregation can rightly be called an historic church.

A more detailed history, up to 2006, can be found on the Fonthill United Church website.

THE FONTHILL COMMUNITY

Fonthill is an attractive, relatively affluent community. In a recent newspaper article it was reported that the median income in Fonthill is \$120,000. Fonthill has a population of 11,000 within the municipal Town of Pelham. It is situated in the middle of the Niagara Peninsula renowned for its vineyards, orchards, schools and tourism. Planned and new development proposes to provide housing for an additional 5,000 residents.

The village is bordered by the city of Welland and is within 20 minutes of St. Catharines and Niagara Falls. These larger urban areas provide employment opportunities and a range of retail options; the Performing Arts Centre and the Meridian Centres are venues for culture and sports. Niagara College and Brock University are within easy driving distance away. The Niagara Health Services plan proposes three hospitals in Niagara including the new hospital in St. Catharines, a new hospital in Niagara Falls and an improved hospital in Welland. The Wellspring Cancer Support facility serving all of Niagara is located in Fonthill.

Fonthill has become a retirement community. In addition to single housing, condos and apartments, there are a variety of senior facilities. St. Charles Village, Woodlands of Sunset, Wesley Robins, Plymouth-Cordage, Seasons, Royal Rose, and Rapalje Lodge are nearby. In addition there are independent living facilities at Lookout Ridge, Shorthills Villa, Town Square Manor and Pelham Seniors Apartments.

Locally there are two elementary schools, one separate school, and a large secondary school. There are several schools in Welland as well. There are also preschools in Fonthill, including a Montessori Preschool operating in Fonthill United Church. In 2018, The Meridian Community Centre was opened providing a wide range of activities. During the summer the village hosts a weekly farmers market and summer concerts in Peace Park.

Fonthill is changing rapidly. The growth in construction of new houses has been explosive. With the legalization of cannabis, six greenhouses, each employing hundreds of people, are now in full operation.

The United Church places Fonthill in Cost of Living category 5. Prices for condos begin at \$400,000 and houses within the village start at \$500,000. Information can be found at the real estate website www.niagararealtor.ca. The Finance Committee has expressed willingness to consider a loan at low interest to the new minister to purchase a home in Fonthill. More affordable housing is available in nearby Welland.

More information can be gleaned from the www.pelham.ca website and www.niagararegion.ca.

Churches within and near Fonthill area are:

- Fonthill United Church, Fonthill
- Pelham Community Church (United Church of Canada), Fenwick
- Fenwick United Church, Fenwick
- Kirk-on-the-Hill Presbyterian Church, Fonthill
- First Presbyterian Church, North Pelham
- Bethany Christian Reformed Church, Fenwick
- Fonthill Baptist Church, Fonthill
- Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Fonthill
- St Alexander Roman Catholic Church, Fonthill
- St Ann's Roman Catholic Church, Fenwick

- Concordia Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), Fonthill
- Glad Tidings Church of God, Fonthill
- Fenwick Church of Christ, Fenwick
- Ridgeville Bible Chapel, Fenwick
- Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, Fonthill
- Pelham Evangelical Friends, Fonthill
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Welland

There is a local ministerial association that meets sporadically for fellowship.

THE CONGREGATION

We are a congregation of friends, celebrating God's presence among us and inviting others to join us. We are like an extended family in that we enjoy being together and supporting one another as we live by our Christian values. We try to be faithful to follow Jesus' teachings and to continue the ministry he began. Jesus reached out to all kinds of people with love and we try to do that too.

We keep our congregation informed through our weekly bulletin. Our newsletter, *The Grapevine*, is published at different times throughout the year. Current information, including our monthly calendar, can be found on our website. We also have a Facebook page.

We are mature. A high proportion of Fonthill residents are retired and an even higher proportion of Fonthill United Church members are too. Some of them have been living in the Niagara Region all their lives but an increasing number of our members have recently moved to Fonthill and area. Many of our members spend their winters in warmer climates so our attendance seems to expand and contract like an accordion.

We welcome new members every year and many of our newest members have taken positions of leadership in the congregation. With the expansion of Fonthill and the new housing developments in Welland, we expect more people will find their church home at Fonthill United.

Fonthill United does not have a Sunday School program for children at present because none of the people who attend regularly have school age children. When children come, they are always welcome to be in church and may sit with their parents during worship. There is a quiet room at the back of the sanctuary, equipped with a washroom, for children who need it. Parents can see and hear the service as their children play.

Fonthill United Church is a congregation with a long history. We've been here since 1842, having worshipped in several buildings. Our current building has had many recent upgrades. The furnace was replaced a few years ago with a fuel efficient model. Fluorescent light fixtures were replaced with energy efficient bulbs. Some flooring was replaced. Solar panels were installed on the roof and they generate income for the operating fund. The building is completely handicap accessible.

Our Mission Statement

The mission statement of Fonthill United Church is:

Words inspire us. Music uplifts us. United in God's love, we strive to be an inclusive community, learning together and supporting others with compassion.

How we do that

Worship – The Sunday service is the focal point of the congregation's week together. The service begins early, at 9:30 am. Our style of worship can be described as traditional United Church: the emphasis is on the Bible and preaching, a 15-20 voice choir sings an anthem each week and leads in the singing of hymns, the hymns are from Voices United, occasionally from More Voices, singing is accompanied by a pipe organ or piano, the congregation sits in pews with hymn books, and there are no screens or projectors. There is a lay reader from the congregation each Sunday. The congregation is accustomed to inclusive language, progressive theology, and preaching that relates the Bible's message to the issues of the day. We strive for excellence in music and preaching so as to facilitate an experience of God's presence and to inspire Christian faith. After the service we meet downstairs for coffee to greet friends and welcome newcomers, living our faith in the present and creating community.

Music - Fonthill United is blessed to have Bill Outred as the music director and to have 15-20 voices in the choir. The sanctuary has a lovely pipe organ and a Yamaha baby grand piano. The music program makes room for guest musicians: cello, trumpet, guitar, and soloists. While preaching makes an appeal to the head, in music God appeals to the heart.

Learning - In the past, discussion groups have met to explore the relevance of Christian faith for living today. Every year these happened during fall and winter for an hour after worship and followed popular video series such as: Living the Questions, the Faith and Reason series, and the Embrace Series. After-church discussion groups have also explored topics such as 'progressive Christianity,' United Church Statements of Faith, and the United Church remits. Participation was high, often with 10-20 people attending. In the past, summer nights were spent watching 'Movies That Matter,' and discussions followed. Fonthill United was also the site for several Niagara Presbytery Licenced Worship Lay Leaders courses.

A Strategic Planning Committee was formed in 2021 to form a strategic plan for our church based on our core values. Through a series of workshops, our core values were developed. A new mission statement reflects those values and helps us make strategic plans for our ministry in the future.

Vision Statement - A confident, vibrant community, honouring God, encouraging diversity, and partnering with our community and others for social justice.

Core Values – Learning, Diversity, Service, Caring, Generosity, Inspiration, Community.

Pastoral Care – With an age mature congregation, pastoral care makes up a large part of the ministry of Fonthill United Church. The minister works with the Pastoral Care Committee in order to enable a network of mutual caring and support. Committee members have taken a training course in pastoral care led by the chaplain at the local hospital and they have provided vulnerable sector reports. Once every month they meet with the minister to talk about concerns in the congregation. They endeavour to be good listeners, to be non-judgemental and to keep sensitive information confidential. By calling and visiting, they help people to feel connected and to assure them that whatever they are going through, they are not alone. In addition, many others in the congregation make regular friendly visits.

Pastoral care offered by the minister includes pastoral counselling, preparation for baptism, conducting marriages, and celebrating lives with funeral and memorial services.

Outreach

Beyond Fonthill United Church, when Fonthill United was part of Niagara Presbytery, several members served the wider United Church. We had three representatives who served on various committees. In addition, we were represented on the Niagara Presbytery Extension Council, the Potentials Fund Committee, and the Board of Cave Springs Camp. We currently have two representatives to Horseshoe Falls Regional Council.

Fonthill United Church is serving the local community by opening the building to those who want to make use of it. Individuals and groups make use of the building daily for music lessons, badminton, A Cappella Niagara Chorus practices, a children's sport class, and several Scouting groups. The Pelham Garden Club holds their monthly meetings at the church. The sanctuary is an occasional venue for concerts.

The community Christmas Eve candlelight communion service attracts people who do not normally attend on Sunday and we have hosted the Fonthill Legion and cadets for Remembrance Day observances. The congregation elects two church members to the Board of Town Square Manor, a local seniors building. Every year, the congregation allocates funds to support several local charities.

There is an active Outreach Committee at Fonthill United. They have raised funds and donations to support Nightlight Youth Services (a shelter for homeless youth), have sponsored a mural at the Hope Centre in Welland, and supported the Huntington Society with an Amaryllis fundraiser. Fonthill United is a partner with Pelham Cares and regularly sponsors food drives.

There is a United Church Women's group which meets monthly except in summer. The meetings are very well attended with as many as 20 women participating, and often invites local speakers to make presentations.

Fonthill United does not offer a Sunday School program or youth groups at present.

Pelham Syrian Refugee Sponsorship

The Pelham Syrian Refugee Sponsorship was a major outreach project of our church. In December 2015, citizens of Pelham formed the twenty person Pelham Syrian Refugee Constituent Group which consisted of members of four local churches and the community at large. In early 2016, the United Church of Canada was chosen as the sponsorship agreement holder. Fonthill United worked with Bethany Christian Reformed Church, Fenwick United Church and Pelham Community Church.

In September 2017, our first family arrived on a Blended Visa Office Referred program where the government shared the monthly housing costs with our group. The family of six consisted of mother, father and four children. They had fled Syria 5 years earlier to Lebanon and were considered high risk. The refugee group leased a 2 storey home in Welland and furnished it for their arrival. Over the next year, there were many adjustments and challenges for the family including the arrival of two little twin boys in October of 2018, just as the legal responsibility for our trusteeship expired.

The second family of four spent years in Lebanon after fleeing Syria and came to Canada on the Private Sponsorship Program by which our sponsoring group was responsible for their support for one year. When they arrived in Canada in May 2018, they took up residence in Fonthill and immediately embraced their new situation. The parents attended Niagara College courses to improve their business English and the twins showed their soccer prowess at school. They are enjoying good health and their transition to Canadian life is going smoothly. This family has now obtained Canadian citizenship.

\$72,995 was raised by the four churches and the Pelham community.

Relationships to other United Churches

Between 2007 and 2017, Fonthill and Fenwick United Churches worked together in partnership to share summer services and some other services. The two churches are only 6 kilometers apart. They share a music director and secretary. In 2017, Fenwick moved to part-time ministry. Fonthill and Fenwick combine with two other United Churches in Welland for an annual Advent carol service and for the Good Friday service.

Demographics of the Congregation – Membership

The congregation has 158 members and 38 adherents. The number of identifiable givers to local expenses is 106 and in 2022, \$162,938 was contributed to the church's Operating Fund.

Age of Contributing Members/Adherents

There is one member or adherent between 21-30.
One member or adherent is between 31-40.
One member or adherent is between 41-50.
Four members or adherents are between 51-60.
Thirteen are between 61-70.
Fifty-three are between 71-80.
Thirty-three are over 81.

A typical worship attendance in the fall is currently about 60 people, in-person and online combined. The congregation is quite homogeneous, almost all Caucasian, English speaking and over 60 years of age.

Financial Viability

Fonthill United Church has undesignated cash reserves of \$266,277. Total revenue in 2022 was \$223,800. The congregation is accustomed to an annual stewardship program and that has resulted in generous contributions. The mean average contribution to the Operating Fund is slightly above \$1,450 per year. Forty-one people contribute through Pre-Authorized Remittance (PAR). In addition, the congregation has been generous with special gifts of money, a piano, lighting fixtures, air conditioning, and stained glass windows. In 2022, the congregation approved a Mission and Service contribution of \$6,395. Solar panels installed in 2011 were fully paid for in November 2018 and are estimated to provide \$10,000 of annual income until the contract is fulfilled in 2031.

Our cash reserve figure is largely composed of revenue from the manse sale in 2007 of \$214,592 (the Manse Fund), and the Enduring Gifts Fund of \$21,448. Since 2012 when the Enduring Gifts Fund achieved its objective of \$100,000 (actually reaching \$100,872) it has been used to cover deficits in the Operating Fund, thus reducing it to the current \$21,448 figure. We feel confident that the church will be financially secure for many years to come. There is an expectation and hope that, given the rapid growth in the area and concerted effort by council, membership will increase so that the church will continue to serve in perpetuity.

Staff

Fonthill employs a full-time ordained minister of word, sacrament and pastoral care, Rev. Robert Lawson; a part-time office administrator/bookkeeper; and a part-time director of music. The church office is fully computerized.