

Nelson United Church, located on Dundas Street, just west of Guelph Line is closing its doors June 25. - Photos by Nikki Wesley - Burlington Post





From left to right, Sandy McKeown, Minister Daryl Webber, Joy Watson and Dale McKeown.



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Sundays used to be days of rest. Shops were closed. Church was a given, as were visits with extended family.

“Sunday was actually a day where you celebrated rest and the break in the routine,” said Minister Daryl Webber of Nelson United Church.

On the seventh day, Sandy McKeown was expected to be in church and she remembers at 17 being forbidden to bowl anymore because her league games were switched to Sunday.

Those in the pews would be in their finest clothes, women adorned in hats and white gloves.

But times have changed, particularly for a quaint little stone church, built in 1859 amid fields and forests along Dundas Street in the former village of Nelson. Its adjoining pioneer cemetery with a smattering of weathered headstones is one of the oldest in the area.

Nelson United Church, located just west of Guelph Line, has seen its share of baptisms, marriages and funerals, celebrated many anniversaries, including its 150th.

For decades it was the hub of the tiny village which also boasted a hotel, gas station, general store and a post office, said congregant Dale McKeown, who was married in the church and his three children and grandchildren baptized there.

And now Nelson United Church is closing its wooden doors for good.

A decision by the church council was made in January after nearly a year and a half of discussions.

“It was extremely hard,” said Dale. “The congregation knew things were not going well and that discussions were going on. Other factors had also been there for the last several years which led to the decision.”

Factors like declining membership.

“It’s not that people are leaving, there’s no new people coming in,” said Dale’s wife Barb.

Members are aging and or not with us anymore, added Joy Watson, a longtime parishioner now in her 90s who joined the church as a bride. Her husband Dorwin’s family were members of Nelson United and her father-in-law Elias was choir leader for many years.

Joy undertook the role of church caretaker, which required lighting the oil burner to heat the church before choir practice. Before being replaced by a furnace, stovepipes ran across the sanctuary ceiling.

“Joy’s big claim to fame was when ‘something happened’ and stovepipes fell and there was soot all over the ladies,” joked Dale, drawing a shy smile from Joy at the recollection.

“There used to be a plank floor and I remember varnishing it at the time I was caring for the church and crawling under the seats to varnish the floor,” said Joy.

There were United Church Women (UCW) card parties that drew up to 30 people and in its prime, an addition was built in 1959 to accommodate the growing congregation, largely paid for by the efforts of the Nelson UCW’s catering services, said Dale.

Nelson Christmas bazaars always attracted healthy crowds, particularly for the home-baked cookies offered for sale, said Barb.

The church also sponsored a Vietnamese family in the 70s and despite its declining congregation, was one of the area churches to sponsor 19 Syrian refugees last year.

Nelson’s Sunday school program used to burst with 30 to 40 kids each week, said Sandy, Dale and Barb’s daughter.

“Judy (Riebot) and I grew up in here, going to Sunday school,” said Sandy. “Judy and I are all that’s left; they’ve moved away or just don’t come to church anymore. It didn’t renew itself like most things do when generations continue.”

Sandy still recalls her grandmother bribing her with pencils and paper or candy to keep her quiet during the service, and as a teen in the choir “watching the old men sleeping in the pews.”

Her teething children also left their mark in the building with tiny teeth imprints on the back of some of the pews.

“My grandmother passed away before my daughter was born and I named my daughter after her. Joy knit me a sweater that she knew my grandmother would have made for me if she was here,” said an emotional Sandy,

She also remembers carefree Sunday afternoons while the parents chatted “forever” outside following the service, running with the other kids through the cemetery and picking lilacs in the spring.

“Or we’d walk down the side of Highway 5 because it wasn’t near as busy as it is now and get ice cream at the store. You wouldn’t let your kid walk down the side of Highway 5 now.”

The reasons behind Nelson’s decreasing congregation, a reality faced by churches everywhere admits Dale, is tied to so many things not the least of which are kids sports and Sunday shopping, he said.

“It used to be a farming community; nobody worked on Sunday except dairy farmers. Farmers looked forward to coming here on Sunday,” commented Joy’s son Wayne.

Currently “on the role” there’s approximately 30 members, however, some of these are younger people away at school so you come down to an active membership of 20 to 25, said Dale.

“Many a Sunday there’s a dozen of us here and that includes four or five in the choir,” said Sandy.

“I guess I make 13,” joked the minister.

Church operating costs are between \$35,000 to \$40,000 but they have been running an annual deficit of \$10,000.

After the case was made to the congregation, a vote took place and it was almost unanimous, said Webber.

“It was a sad day,” said Dale.

“A very sad day,” added Barb.

After the final June 25 service, the small but close-knit Nelson membership will join with Tansley United Church.

“We still have some people who are upset with the decision but I think for the most part congregants are sad to see an end, but are looking forward to a new beginning,” said Dale.

As Nelson was one of the congregations that sponsored Tansley when it opened, one of Tansley’s board members commented that it would be “like moving in with the kids,’ which I thought was a good way to redeem the whole situation,” said Webber.

The church in those early days was really good at doing and being a community, enabling longevity of relationships and intergenerational relationships, as well as providing rites of passage, baptisms, weddings and funerals, said the minister, who serves both Nelson and Lowville United Church and will continue at the latter once Nelson closes its doors.

We knew the writing was on the wall, that it was time, but it took quite awhile to say it loud; we couldn’t bring ourselves to actually say it.

“We sure had a lot of fun here,” said Barb.

It is memories of fellowship and friends that Joy will take with her.

“We all seemed to work together. You really felt welcome,” said Joy.

“It’s like a family even though we’re not connected by blood,” said Riebot.

“I imagine church contributed to better mental health than we might think. People were connected; they did have that break (from the every day),” said Webber.

Her fondest memories, said Barb, are the Christmas Eve services, one in particular during an ice storm when Lowville United was shut down and members joined Nelson’s service. “It was the fullest I’d seen the church on Christmas Eve for many years. Everybody had lit candles and we were singing *Silent Night*. It was beautiful,” smiled a teary-eyed Barb.

Christmas Eve services were beautiful, agreed Sandy, but there’s another profound memory she will carry with her.

“The Sunday after we took the vote instead of having service in here (the church), we all sat out back. It was very much grieving. All people talked about were the people; as much as we love our building and were sad to close and sad to see it go, what upset people most was the people. If we can still be with the people we care about — the building is beautiful but it’s bricks and mortar — but it’s the people who made it,” said Sandy.

The building has been sold and will continue as a place of worship with the addition used for a variety of community activities, said Dale.

The new owner is Hindu and he was open to an interfaith kind of space as far as I understood it,” said Dale.

The newer owner also joined the congregation for one of their services where he talked about Hindu scriptures and their relatedness to our scriptures.

“That was kind of an important moment in recognizing similarities,” said Webber.

A special Celebration service will be held on June 11 when previous ministers and parishioners will be in attendance.

Members are considering undertaking a symbolic gesture to demonstrate that they are “carrying on” with a “little pilgrimage” where the sanctuary cross will be carried to Tansley in the months after the church closes.