

Reaching out and building relationships with newcomers is vital, says Church leader



By Brock Weir

Paul Kang came to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church at a time of transition.

They were at a crossroads looking for direction, in between ministers and, in some cases, looking for healing and building a new church in a changing world.

They had tough questions to ask themselves and figure out just how they fit in, and these were tasks which fell to Kang, who recently wrapped up a two year stint as St. Andrew's interim minister and, as he heads off to his next assignment, he believes the church has been able to find its feet once again.

“My mandate was pretty simple,” he says. “They felt before they called someone permanent to be here, they wanted to look at themselves, what they are about and those questions are key. Any organization or family, there is a history here – some of it good, some of it not so good. It was to come to terms with the history, maybe a bit of a healing process, naming what happened, behaviours we are not proud of, ask for forgiveness from God or one another, and move forward. But it is hard to move forward until there is some closure there.”

“As an interim minister, I come in and ask if those relationships are repairable. If not, maybe people are, instead of staying in that inertia, let's move on and figure out a way where all parties can treat each other with dignity and respect. They might not necessarily agree, but at the very least treat each other with respect, with dignity, and part ways.”

Since he arrived at St. Andrew's, Kang says he has seen people who have moved on but, at the same time, there have been many people who have joined. This, he says, is a good indication that the healing process is in full swing.

“The mandate was to come to terms with history, but also to clarify the mission and purpose of the church,” he elaborates. “Why are we here? We are a worshipping community, to help people so people feel like they belong. There is an isolation, so we want people to feel connected and participate in a larger purpose.”

It was a community he says that was, upon arrival, one based on “doing.” There was no shortage of initiatives at St. Andrew's and no shortage of people looking to become involved, but there was a bridge that needed to be gapped. Pots & Pins, for instance, was a program run by a couple of dedicated volunteers teaching youth how to cook and sew. But this program was in a situation where there were no new volunteers to take over – a possible sign of the interest and purpose it still had within the community at large. Martha's Table is another example. Martha's Table is a weekly affordable luncheon for people in the community which was going through what Kang describes as “the sheer will, effort and determination” of singular volunteer Helen Dawn, who founded the program in 2005.

She would buy the groceries, cook up to eight soups and make desserts, but despite the number of people who would help, she was the driving force. This driving force, however, came to a halt last year when Helen became sick, leaving the program with a gap. This gap was eventually filled when Martha's Table came under the umbrella of the ecumenical Welcoming Arms, bringing with it an even larger group of volunteers and a new vitality.

“That is why the church is here today, to make sure people who sometimes feel overlooked feel like they belong from all walks of

life; that is evidenced in Sunday worship, Martha's Table, and the Aurora Community Café, said Kang, referencing lastly an ongoing initiative founded in 2017 to give individuals with intellectual challenges the opportunity to build skills while running a café. It has been about identifying new leaders and a couple of new leaders have emerged. A good leader is someone who people are looking to follow. There are a lot of managers out there, people who are willing to do the tasks, but a leader is about inspiring others, being inspired to lead and to lead by example. In the context of this church, I think the leaders we are looking for are leaders who can be a healing presence, who are unafraid to speak the truth in love, to be able to hold people to a higher standard. Over the past two years, Kang says he has seen the church build deeper relationships with other churches and community groups, including the Aurora Cultural Centre, and these newly formed connections are, he says, what the future of St. Andrew's and any church, for that matter is all about.

In the future I see St. Andrew's health and wellbeing very much tied in with the health and wellbeing of this part of Aurora. I think if the welfare of the town thrives, I think most likely this church will be a part of that and will be participating in that thriving, says King, noting that it is important to address the needs of new Canadians, persons with disabilities, and people struggling with mental illness and loneliness.

I hope this church is at the very frontlines of that type of work because I think that is the type of work that can bring about transformation for the individual and for the Town itself. They are in need of someone to love them or nurture them. As Paul said in his letters to the Corinthian church, love is patient and kind. It requires a lot of patience and kindness. Love is not necessarily emotion, but it is a discipline as well. It is holding them to account and expecting more from them, and to set boundaries as well.