

How Huron Shores United Church Opened its Doors to Grand Bend

Faith & the Common Good
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Recognizing the opportunity to improve

Grand Bend is a small resort community on the shores of Lake Huron, about an hour northwest of London. Its beautiful beaches have attracted tourists and cottagers for decades, and more recently retirees have discovered its charms. A red brick church building with a distinctive six-sided tower has been a part of the town's main street for almost 100 years.

In the earliest years, the campers in our resort community united with our church and during July and August Sunday outdoor services are conducted in our "Green Cathedral" welcoming our tourists and community, a tradition that continues today. past three years, the church has reinvented itself as a much-needed community hub and concert hall, an integral and valued part of the community.

The leaders of Grand Bend United Church (as it then was known) knew the building needed updating and had been discussing options since the early 2000s. At one point a life lease housing community was considered. Later, land was purchased outside the main village for a new building. During a visioning session held in 2011, the church recognized that with an aging congregation, its future lay in connecting with the community around it. Activities such as Free Stores, beach clean-ups, and donations to support local people in need began the process of reaching out. In 2012, deeming the cost of the new church prohibitive, the congregation decided to stay where it was on the "main drag" and update the existing building. Accessibility, sustainability and flexibility were the main design criteria.





Collaborating with the community to bridge the gap

Major work was completed to restore and protect the historic exterior. An addition was required to house a full-size elevator and accessible washrooms, to exceed government requirements and make the building only the second fully accessible community space in Grand Bend. As plans developed, the congregation merged with that of Greenway United Church, a few kilometers away, and the name was changed to Huron Shores United Church. To honor that development, the Greenway Chapel was incorporated into the plans. The sanctuary was to be remodeled to act as a multi-use facility with state-of-the-art audio-visual and theatrical lighting capabilities, and a modern commercial kitchen was added in the lower level.

And of course, there was the question of funding. The congregation was relatively small and couldn't provide all the estimated \$2 million needed to complete the project. To many, it seemed risky to start construction without knowing where the money would come from. But in 2016, inspired by a lively new minister and led by a committed Building Team, the church took the plunge. Members of the congregation supported the building project strongly. More remarkable, donations were received by community members outside the congregation. Federal and municipal grants, donations from the Grand Bend Community Foundation and the Rotary Club, debentures, and a mortgage from the United Church helped bridge the gap.

Building for the religious and secular community

As construction was underway, the congregation was preparing to welcome the community. In 2017, it became the first church in the former Huron Perth Presbytery to become an Affirming Congregation, explicitly opening the doors to people of all sexual orientations. Another team began working on reconciliation, connecting with the nearby Indigenous community.

By 2018, the church was ready to launch most of its renewed building and to encourage its use by the community. It didn't take long for groups like the Grand Bend Community Foundation and the Grand Bend Rotary Club to start booking the space. The building became the rain location for popular beachfront concerts on Wednesday and Sunday evenings. The church was even included on the local holiday home tour. A gala concert was planned in the fall of 2018, and soon there were concerts planned monthly.

“*The community of Grand Bend gets this shift of a traditional church now willing to be integrated into the community. Organizations that don't normally give to religious institutions supported this project, because they were giving to an institution that is as much a part of the secular community as it is a church.*

Peter Challen, congregation member

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Everyone is proud to see the building used seven days a week, often with several meetings happening simultaneously. Recently the congregation hired a Community Wellness Coordinator to develop programs to combat social isolation – a role that has become especially important in the face of the COVID 19 pandemic. Another exciting development was the creation of “Grand Bend Place—Centre for the Living Arts,” a group of individuals from the church and community tasked with creating and programming a secular concert space.

Keys to success

Strong spiritual leadership

The previous minister Harry Disher and current minister Kate Crawford provided guidance and inspiration, keeping spirits high in challenging times and maintaining the focus on spiritual growth and community outreach.

Exceptional volunteer leadership

Through the church management team, the Building Team, and now Grand Bend Place, remarkable individuals stepped forward to push this project forward. They faced tough decisions and challenging situations without losing heart. They were (and are) tireless in their gift of time, passion and spirit.

Open, flexible congregation

It hasn't always been a smooth transition from traditional church mode to life as a community hub. The healthy debate developed around issues such as what to do with the cross when a rock concert was underway! Getting over the bumps required mutual understanding and respect and heartfelt accommodation. Regular communication has been critical in this process.

“As we reflect on our pathway, it's clear that change is always with us. It has become our friend and mentor.

Bob Illman, Chair of Trustees

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