

“One Church, Many Stories”

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Today we pause, not just to count years, but to honour a living story - one that has been unfolding here at Bethel for well over a century. A story of faith, hospitality, resilience, and grace. A story still being written by the people gathered here today, and by those who came before.

Bethel’s story doesn’t begin in 1925 - though it proudly joined the United Church of Canada that year. It reaches back even further, to 1883, when this congregation first gathered as an Episcopal Methodist Church. Long before church union was even imagined, people were already worshipping, serving, and singing right here.

That’s more than 140 years of being the Church - not just in name, but in action, in presence, and in heart.

And what a heart this church has.

In a time when many congregations lost their choirs - and didn’t get them back - Bethel’s choir is stronger than ever. And more than that: you, the congregation, didn’t stop singing. You sing with strength, with joy, with conviction. You sing like it matters - like the words are alive, like the Spirit is moving through every verse. Visiting ministers have gone away saying so. Your reputation for singing the hymns with your whole selves is known well beyond these walls. That’s no small thing.

Because music isn’t just a nice addition to worship. It’s part of how the soul breathes. When a congregation sings with heart, it says something profound about who they are. And Bethel sings like a community that knows how to hold joy and grief in the same breath - that has known silence, and chosen sound.

And then... there’s lunch. Bethel is known for its lunches - not just among those who attend, but even beyond the congregation.

It’s not just coffee and cookies. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s the sandwiches made and shared with such care. And at times, hot soup. Other delights pop up from time to time - a surprise dessert, a homemade treat - each one offered with the same generous spirit. It’s the way you gather, not just to eat, but to be together. You offer what you have, and in doing so, you offer yourselves. Every Sunday, you create a space that says, “You belong.” You nourish the body - and with it, the heart.

And it doesn't stop there. Throughout the year, this church brings people together with roast beef dinners, lasagna suppers, and a Community Christmas Potluck that extends warmth and welcome to all who walk through the door. These meals fill more than stomachs - they fill a need for connection, comfort, and care.

That is a rare and powerful ministry - especially in a world where so many people feel lonely, disconnected, or unseen. A meal served in love may not seem like ministry in the traditional sense - but it absolutely is. It's communion in another form. And it is sacred.

Your church knows how to make space - at the table, in the pews, and in the heart. That's why your doors open not just for worship, but for Purse Bingos, yard sales, and bake tables that bring in the wider community. Events that blur the line between church and neighbourhood, that remind people the Church can be joyful, welcoming, warm.

That hospitality doesn't happen without effort. It's made possible by the people who show up early and stay late. By those who know how to stretch a recipe, who remember favourite hymns, who check in on someone who's been missing, who organize, clean, phone, drive, bake, listen, and pray. Some do so quietly, without ever being named - and yet their faithfulness is part of the foundation this church rests on.

And it's not just long-time members. Over the years, newcomers have arrived - some with hesitation, some with hope - and found that there was a place for them here. Not just a seat, but a welcome. Not just a building, but a community.

You are not a large church by numbers, but you are abundant in grace. Your impact stretches beyond your size because your faith stretches beyond your comfort. Because you believe that being the Church means more than just showing up - it means showing care.

And so here, today, as you gather to mark 100 years with the United Church of Canada, you also mark something deeper: over 140 years of faithful presence in this church. A congregation that has held together - through change, through challenge, through joy and through struggle. A people stitched together by faith.

That's reflected in the quilt that now hangs in your sanctuary - not as a centrepiece, but as a quiet witness. A symbol of what has been pieced together over time. Each shape uniform in shape, yet different in pattern and colour. Each one necessary to the whole. Just like each person who has found a place here.

But the quilt - like this moment - is not the end of the story.

The Spirit is still moving. The next chapter is still being written. This congregation will continue to be a place where welcome is lived, where grace is practised, where music rises, and where meals are shared. The legacy you've received is being carried forward - not just remembered, but embodied in each act of love, each shared prayer, each open door.

The future of the Church won't be measured in numbers alone. It will be felt in how deeply people are welcomed. In how courageously justice is pursued. In how faithfully love is lived - not in theory, but in casserole dishes, in harmonies, in shared tables, in steady presence.

So may you carry that story - and the Spirit that breathes through it - with joy, with courage, and with hope.

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And by the grace of God, the story continues.