

# PARISH HOUSE

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Newmarket Church of Christ

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## WHAT IN HEAVEN'S NAME?

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Nathan Pickard

The neighbours wanted to enjoy an evening of chicken wings and drinks. It seemed that being socially isolated from family, friends, co-workers and neighbours was taking its toll, in a variety of ways. It was a Thursday evening and we gathered in John's backyard (of course we were socially distant from one another).

The six of us arrived. On the table were boxes of chicken wings, each with our names on a box. We took our boxes of chicken wings and sat

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# \$10,000 . . . TO FEED THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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I had learned over the previous months while packing food boxes how Rita deeply cared about the neighbourhood and the injustice of food scarcity. The phone was ringing and my caller ID showed it was Rita. It was also 4pm and I had a pile of work to accomplish before I left the office. But for some reason, I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to answer. "*Hello.*" "*Hey Nathan. I'm really glad I got a hold of you. I have a question. And I hope your not busy.*"

For some reason I was hesitant. Who wouldn't be? "*What's up?*" I asked. "*I just received information of a possible grant and I would like to apply for the grant on behalf of the church. The grant will be to help feed the neighbourhood. You okay if we apply for the grant?*" Hesitantly I agreed. Then the unexpected. "*The application is due by 5pm. We have to start working on it now.*" I dropped what I was doing so that Rita and I could apply for the grant. At 4:59 Rita sent the application in. A few weeks later I opened up an email. The Newmarket Church of Christ was being awarded a grant of \$10,000 to continue working towards food security in our neighbourhood.\*\*

## **How the Food Boxes Started**

In March, when Covid shut down our community, I became afraid for many people living in the neighbourhood. Conversations were started between volunteers of Maple Leaf Public School and residents of Newmarket Heights. We met to discuss what we were seeing and hearing about the neighbourhood. We learned that food security is a troubling issue. Maple Leaf school, financial donors, VanSpall's No Frills, and many volunteers worked together to provide food boxes for families in the neighbourhood. The food boxes have not just been the means to provide food to struggling families, they have been the means to developing trust and building friendships.

## **Giving Thanks**

It's nearing Canadian Thanksgiving and soon many families will be sitting down at the table sharing a Thanksgiving dinner. Some families have a tradition of giving voice to what they are thankful for. For myself, I am thankful for the trust that volunteers at Maple Leaf and JLR Bell Public Schools are providing to us. I am grateful for the gift of hospitality the neighbourhood shares with our faith community. I am humbled by the generosity of strangers, friends and family. I am amazed at the friendships this church is creating with residents of the neighbourhood. I am surprised at the way this faith community proclaims the in-breaking kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul, when writing to the Christian faith community in the city of Thessalonica, writes, "*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Thessalonians 1:2-4).

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# What In Heaven's Name, Cont'd

down to share table fellowship. The conversation started light then suddenly my neighbour shouts out, "*What the hell is going on in our world?*" It didn't take long for my neighbour to rehearse everything that he sensed was wrong: pandemic, American politics, families with cancer, neighbourhood struggling with addictions, angry customers and co-workers. Everyone nodded their head in agreement, "*What the hell was wrong with our world?*"

Before my mom calls me and tells me to watch my words, I want to say that my neighbours were asking an important question. It seems that if something could go wrong, it was going wrong. The predominate narrative defining current realities was a narrative of scarcity, fear and death and when a narrative of scarcity, fear, and death is the norm, no wonder people ask, "*What the hell is happening?*"

There is, thankfully, the opposite question. Unfortunately not everyone asks the opposite question for not everyone has a worldview or a Christian faith system that allows one to ask a question that is rooted in the story of God. The opposite question is, "*What in heaven's name is happening?*" When one asks, "*What in heaven's name is happening?*" one is expecting that God is at work in our midst; that God is present; that God's redemptive love is being revealed and manifested in ways we might not always be able to see or understand. Therefore, "*What in heaven's name is happening?*" becomes one of the most important questions we need to be asking as it leads us to put on a different set of glasses . . . a set of glasses that reshape what we see happening around us.

When one asks, "*What the hell is happening?*" one might see death, destruction, fear, scarcity, anger, hatred, bigotry, injustice. When one asks, "*What in heaven's name is happening?*" one might see redemption, liberation, justice, welcome, hospitality, generosity, healing. The former question is one where we struggle to see hope. The later question is one where people find hope.

Looking closely at the context of the Newmarket Church of Christ, one could certainly ask *What the hell is happening?* And we might describe how addictions are ruining families, how poverty affects a child's education, how the lack of food security creates hungry families. These, and much more, are a result of a fallen world; a world marked by the scars of death. But if we take the time to ask *What in heaven's name is happening?* We might describe a very different context: generosity being practiced by the neighbourhood is leading to food security, individuals struggling with addictions are on the path of sobriety, walls meant to separate are being torn down to create hospitable streets, in places of death we see life, in moments of injustice we see justice and in the midst of racism we see reconciliation and equality.

Kris called me one afternoon and asked if we could talk. It just so happened that Kris knew a non-profit organization that received a grant to give away fresh vegetables. Kris asked, "*Do you think the neighbourhood could use some fresh vegetables?*" As Kris asked the question I couldn't help but ask, *What in heaven's name is going on?*

Two principles of two separate schools in our neighbourhood sat inside the church. We had gathered on a Tuesday afternoon to discuss what practices we might embody to be good neighbours and to practice justice in our neighbourhood . Sitting there I couldn't help but ask, *What in heaven's name is going on?*

Boxes of food are being lined up outside on a chilly September afternoon. I walk up the wheelchair ramp and into the sanctuary where we gather for worship and witness people of faith packing boxes alongside an atheist. I see individuals who have recently gathered for Christian worship laughing alongside those who haven't participated in Christian worship in decades. Seeing what I was seeing I couldn't help but wonder, *What in heaven's name is going on?*

I can tell you what I think is going on in the name of heaven . . . God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is breaking into our midst. It seems the Lord's Prayer is coming true, "*Let thy kingdom come on earth as it is heaven.*" Thanks be to God, Amen.

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## Where Are We With The Parish House?

Before we invite a family to move into the neighbourhood and to continue the kingdom work we are engaged in, three specific areas need to be completed: (1) incorporation of the Newmarket Church of Christ, (2) completion of business plan for Parish House, and (3), secure adequate funding. We are nearing the completion of items 1 and 2. Item 3 will commence in early 2021.

"To be most effective in bringing about change in a community or a neighborhood, it helps if you live there."

Larry James, *The Wealth of the poor*

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