



**Newmarket Church of Christ
Parish House**

Volume II

The stories we tell are revealing. They tell something about who we are, what we are, and what our morals, values, and identity are. Stories paint a picture of our lives. In September 2022, we hosted the funeral of a retired Platoon Chief in the Newmarket Fire department. When I sat with the grieving wife and asked her to tell stories of her husband, John, a picture was painted. The story of John hosting all the new recruits for a study session painted a picture of the kind of commander John was. The story about John driving the firetruck up to the baseball diamond to watch his children play baseball painted a picture of John as a father. Stories paint a picture.

This is the second volume of stories we are telling. The stories compiled are not a complete set; there are other stories we can and should tell. Space doesn't allow us to tell all of them. The stories you're about to read will paint a picture. The picture being painted is about our life in God that is unfolding. This unfolding picture is of a Christian faith community caught up in God's redemptive work; of God's kingdom arriving in our midst. A picture of a faith community being formed against many odds. It's a picture of a reckless farmer throwing out the seeds of the kingdom and waiting with anticipation for a harvest of thirty, sixty and hundred percent (Matthew 13:1-9).

On behalf of the Newmarket Church of Christ,

You're Invited

Andrew Root writes the following, “A community [of faith] becomes depressed when its identity continues to rest on its resources instead of its relationships.”¹ When I first read this line I glossed over it. I continued to read further into the book, but strangely found myself going back to that line again and again. Why?

COVID has disrupted all aspects of our society and lives. For many, resources have been depleted and diminished in a variety of ways. Diminished resources force us into a cycle where we are asked to spin the wheel faster hoping and praying that more resources will become available. But as we learn, the spinning of the wheel only creates burnout, frustration, and the feeling of malaise.

Resources are important. But when our identity rest on the resources, our suspicion is, as Andrew Root helpfully articulates, that the congregation can become depressed. Is there another way forward? Is there a way forward for our faith communities to move forward in the mission of God. We are learning to pay attention to our relationships.

Ponder this: God moves toward living in relationship with his creation. God doesn't wait for creation to make the first move; God makes the first move toward living in relationship. After nearly two decades in congregational ministry, I have noticed that most churches are waiting for people to make the first move towards the church. We wait and wait and wonder why no one is showing up to live in relationship with God's people. So what would happen if we made the first move? What would happen if the church did the hard work of discerning how to live into relationship with her neighbours rather than waiting for the neighbourhood to make the first move?

This, in many ways, is the work of the Parish House. The Parish House is a way to live in relationship with our neighbours. The Parish House becomes a way to follow God into the neighbourhood. As Eugene Peterson helpfully translates John 1:14, “*The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.*”

We invite you into this journey of moving into the neighbourhood . . .

¹ Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 234.



The Drug Dealer Called & Wanted A Coffee

My wife and I were driving home one evening when my phone suddenly began blowing up. It was relentless. The ringing was endless and my text message notification was continually beeping. Something happened! The next day I called Jenny.

Jenny is a close friend and has become a very important partner in the kingdom work we do as a faith community in the neighbourhood. In fact, I don't think we can do what we do without Jenny. Yet what's fascinating: Jenny's life is not yet fully centered in God. Jenny hasn't walked through the waters of baptism, doesn't participate in our weekly worship, and the odd time thinks that what we believe as a faith community is superstitious. Despite our faith differences, Jenny cares deeply for our faith community and will do anything for us.

Jenny is a matriarch of the neighbourhood. When a child needs to have their injuries bandaged, Jenny will set aside any differences she has and place a bandage on the wound. When swords are picked up and the threat of violence is about to spill into the streets, Jenny will tell everyone to put their swords away. When an unexpected crowd shows up for dinner and there is no food, Jenny will take the little food people have, and before anyone realizes what's happened, a feast is set. When injustice takes place against the least of these, Jenny is quick to demand justice and works towards justice.

I called Jenny. Jenny was quiet, emotional, and her voice quivered in fear. A shooting took place in the neighbourhood and Cody was shot five times in the back. Cody was the best friend of Gary. Gary was the local drug dealer. Gary is Jenny's son.

The next day I found myself sitting on Jenny's front porch. "Can you do the funeral for Cody?" "Sure." An hour later I walked back to the church wondering what I had just agreed too. The next Sunday I invited the church to attend the funeral for Cody. Some people in the church thought I had lost my mind. I won't lie; I wondered myself.

On the day of the funeral we had all sorts of people gathered in the sanctuary. We had saints who deeply believed God was at work in the world, and we had addicts, drunks, and a lot of angry people. Several people were wearing their gang colours. Gary was absent. I was told we couldn't start the funeral till Gary arrived. I took a deep breath and waited at the door for Gary. Gary showed up carrying a bottle of whiskey. He drank whiskey through the whole funeral service.

Three weeks later my phone rings. It's Gary. Gary asks, "*Can I come over for a coffee?*" What is one suppose to do or think when the local drug dealer asks you for a coffee? Fifteen minutes later Gary was sitting inside my office.

"I need to get out! If I don't get out I will be dead." I sat speechless. I didn't know what to say or do. Over the next several weeks the wheels were put in motion and Gary started the journey of sobriety. It was a difficult journey. Several twists and turns and unexpected detours. The destination never changed; the road was simply long—very long.

One day while sitting and having a coffee with Gary, Gary asked about baptism. We talked about what baptism means and the commitment baptism entails. About a month later, Gary said to me, "*I'm ready.*" "*Really?*" "*Yep. My life needs to be centered in God.*" We arranged for Sunday May 5th to be Gary's baptismal Sunday.

"Will you invite your family?"

"Will I invite my family? I'm going to invite the entire neighbourhood to my baptism. The neighbourhood needs to witness how God can change lives. And FYI, this church is going to be full!"

Gary wasn't kidding. On Sunday May 5th the church was full. When it came time to pray for each other, we asked if there was anyone whom we could pray for. The hands shot up in the air.

Can you pray for my sister; she lost custody of her kids.

Can you pray for my brother; he overdosed on Friday night.

Can you pray for my father; he is incarcerated.

Can you pray for me; I want to get sober.

Can you pray for my grandma; she just died.

Can you pray for my mother; I haven't seen her in three years.

Later in the service, Gary told his story and walked through the waters of baptism. Gary now works as an addiction counselor. The seeds of the kingdom have taken root! Thanks be to God.



Food Boxes

COVID struck! Borders between countries were locked down. A cough in a grocery store aisle had the power to clear everyone standing in a twenty-foot radius. Hospitals became overcrowded. People lived in fear. Political turmoil ensued. Businesses were forced to shut down. The lucky ones worked from home while the unlucky were forced to work “in-person” or became unemployed.

For awhile, the Canadian government handed out COVID relief cheques. Not everyone was eligible. We realized as a faith community that many in the Newmarket Heights neighbourhood would struggle. With this realization, the church, a couple of volunteers from the local school and residents of Newmarket Heights met on zoom to understand how families in the neighbourhood would be affected. We quickly realized that food security was a significant concern. But what would we do together? We scratched our heads in bewilderment.

Finally, someone asked, *“Can we just get some boxes of food together and give the food we collect to the families who are most in need?”* It wasn’t a bad idea. But how would we know what families had been affected the most?

The two local schools partnered with us in several different ways in order to ensure at-risk families could have a food box. We walked the streets and knocked on a few doors asking for help to ensure that the most at-risk families would receive a box of food. Soon, those who lived in the neighbourhood and had their finger on the pulse of families who were struggling reached out and helped make certain various individuals and families received a box food.

We called a friend who lives in Newmarket and owns a grocery store in a neighbouring town if he could help us acquire food. He agreed without hesitation. We asked family and friends if they would like to become financial donors. They agreed without hesitation. Soon, civic clubs and businesses heard about the food boxes and they became partners. Even other churches caught wind of what we were doing and partnered with us.

Each month, a minimum of fifty families received a box of food. This continued for twenty-six months. Someone once asked, *“How did you do it?”* We told them the story of a few fish and some pieces of bread and how God can take what little we have and ensure there are leftovers.



Dancing In the Church Parking Lot

I grew up in a faith tradition where churches frowned upon dancing. They said dancing led straight to the devil's ways. But when two neighbours started dancing in our church's parking lot, the dance didn't lead to the devil's ways; it led to the kingdom of God.

For several years we've been partnering with a group of ladies who have taken up the task of ensuring families in the Newmarket Heights neighbourhood are able to have a Christmas. At first, we were simply the outside help: we provided a breakfast for participants and sponsored various families. Through a series of events, we eventually became the location where the Christmas event was planned and hosted.

Beginning in October, the group of ladies begin meeting in the basement of the church building, developing plans for the Christmas program. Nearly 100 families receive help each Christmas. That means 100 families will receive a phone call. There is a lot of work!

This particular year, evictions in the neighbourhood were very high. We learned that an elderly lady, who somehow was evicted, took up residence in a shed. The family who was renting out the house where the shed was situated, invited the elderly lady to live with them. When we were told the story, our jaws were hanging open. We couldn't believe what we were hearing.

When families arrive to pick up their Christmas baskets, we always have tables set up with various extra items that families can choose from, such as clothes and other small items. The elderly lady who lived in the shed showed up and did some shopping. As I was carrying out a bag of items she had chosen, I asked the elderly lady if she found what she needed. *"Oh yeah! I found these dancing shoes."* She put on the shoes and did a dance in the parking lot of the church.

Earlier in the day, a mother of two showed up to receive her gifts and also to do a little shopping. Off to the side was a fold-up bed; the kind one might keep hidden in a closet for when a bed was needed. The young mother walked straight over to the bed and said, *"Is this available?" "It certainly is." "Can I have this?" "Absolutely."* Two of us carried the fold-away bed up the stairs and loaded it in the delivery truck. As we were walking outside, we couldn't help but notice the mother doing a dance. We start laughing and asked, *"Why are you dancing?" "Because I finally have a bed for my ten-year old son."*



The Big Yellow Bus

I met the friendly bus driver but when I started singing, *"The wheels on the bus go round and round."* She quickly interrupted my out-of-tune rendition and politely and firmly asked that I never sing those words again on her school bus.

The bus arrived in the church parking lot. A few families and individuals had already gathered for our trip to the local food bank. The food bank is located on the other side of Town, in an industrial plaza. It is expensive to take a taxi. It is difficult to use public transit. Public transit to the food bank takes about an hour, combined with the difficulty of returning with a large box of food, and then carrying the box from the bus stop to where a person lives. This is extremely difficult, if not impossible for an elderly person. Therefore, we partnered with the local food bank: we would rent a bus and transport families and individuals to the food bank once a month.

A mixture of people joined us on the bus. We had a newly married mom who brought her two-year old child. We had a single mom whose nine-month-old baby giggled up a storm. We had a few refugees and immigrants who haven't seen their immediate families in several years. We had a grandmother who raises her granddaughter. We had a middle-aged woman and a woman whose sister is dying in a hospital. We have a mixed bag of people on the bus.

While the bus is making its way across town, laughter can be heard. Someone tells a joke and everyone laughed. Someone makes fun of me and the bus erupts again in laughter. A motorcycle pulled up and the middle-aged woman says, *"That's sexy."* Everyone laughed again—even the bus driver! We arrived at the food bank and whatever the volunteers said made everyone break out in laughter.

Over the next 90 minutes we stood together, laughing, sharing stories, telling jokes, and helping each other carry groceries onto the bus. As for the two infants—they got passed around like a hot potato. It seems each person had a turn holding the hand of a little two-year old or holding the nine-month-old.

The strangest thing happened the following Sunday . . . a few of those people who rode the bus came to church and shared a meal together. They even brought their friends. In a world that has never been so connected and yet more isolated, who would have thought that riding a big yellow bus would be the means through which the seeds of friendship could be planted.



Brent Cyprus
July 31, 1990 – March 19, 2022

Funerals

I grew up with grandparents whose calling was to care for the living by caring for the dead. The funeral home became a playground for us children when we went to visit grandma and grandpa. We got to ride our bikes down the ramp that led to the embalming room. We got to ride the secret elevator up and down. The odd time when grandpa wasn't looking, we snuck into the funeral home and peered into the coffins. Of course, we were conscripted into cleaning the vehicles that transported families to and from the cemetery. Grandpa was adamant that the funeral home had spotless vehicles.

Grandpa never used this language, but his actions certainly revealed this truth: the living are cared for when the dead are cared for. In fact, I am convinced the path of healing can be walked when the dead have been cared for.

The first several months of 2022 have been a year of tragic funerals. Here are some of the funerals we've had to host as a faith community this year:

- A 19-year-old who died due to an infection that was kept secret from her family
- A 32-year-old who died of brain cancer and left behind a son and wife
- A 44-year-old who died unexpectedly of cirrhosis of the liver
- A 22-year-old homeless man who froze to death on the streets
- A 29-year-old who died of a drug overdose

Nearly thirty years ago Elisabeth lost her son. Over the years I have listened to Elisabeth at times tell a story about this tragic moment in her life. The stories are like pieces of a puzzle that, when put together, become a painting. The pieces to this puzzle come sporadically through a story or a memory that is shared over a cup of coffee, in a worship service, or on the phone. When our congregation faced the death of a 14-year-old girl during COVID, I called Elisabeth and asked if she could join me and the family for a cup of coffee.

I picked Elisabeth up and we drove to the family's home. Elisabeth treated this as a holy moment. We arrived, sat on the back porch, and watched parents grieve. In time, Elisabeth said the following: "*You will laugh again.*" Elisabeth then told her story.

While sitting on the back porch listening to Elisabeth's story, I couldn't help but think of Sarai who laughed, the slaves leaving Egypt laughing and singing the song of liberation, David and the army laughing and singing when Goliath was defeated, Rhoda who probably laughed when Peter knocked on the door (Acts 12), and the psalmist who wrote, "*Weeping may stay for the night but rejoicing comes in the morning*" (Psalm 30:5). As I listened to Elisabeth's story, I began to whisper a prayer that the family who faced the death of a child would once again laugh because they were experiencing God's goodness, love, mercy, presence, and healing. *Weeping may stay for the night but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

As a congregation whose presence is rooted in a specific neighbourhood, we often find ourselves called into some of the most difficult moments a family will ever face. When called, we mourn with those who mourn but we also come to bring a word of hope: God, in Jesus, through the power of the Spirit, is at work in ways we might not see, understand, or know.

A theologian once said that we learn to recognize the work of God by knowing the stories of God at work in the past. If this theologian is correct, then we can have hope that in the midst of tragic deaths, those who weep will learn to laugh again—they will laugh because of God at work in their lives. *Weeping may stay for the night but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

A Partnership

For several years we've been living with a vision of inviting a family to live in the neighbourhood with the intention of connecting the church and the neighbourhood in the name of Jesus. This is an audacious vision that grows out of the ministry we have been engaged in over the last decade. After several years of living and working towards this vision, it's now time for implementation.

Here are three ways you can partner with us to help us implement this vision:

1. Pray for us and our neighbourhood.
2. Ensure that you are on the quarterly newsletter mailing list and when the opportunity arises, become a trusted voice of guidance.
3. Financially partner with us. The Parish House is a three-year experiment and can only move forward with financial partners. A business plan and ways of providing financial support will be provided to those who are willing to become financial partners.

We look forward to hearing and joining in partnership with you.

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