

St. Paul and St. James United Church in Madawaska celebrate 125 years



By Michael Riley

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St. Paul and St. James United Church in Madawaska is celebrating 125 years this year, having opened its doors for the first time back in 1899 as a Presbyterian Church, before entering the union of the Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists and becoming a United Church in 1925 called St. Paul's. In addition to celebrating 125 years, Sept. 29 was also the last regular service to be held at St. Paul and St. James due to amalgamation, and services will henceforth be held down in Maynooth. A reception followed the Sept. 29 service at the Madawaska Community Centre. Reverend Marilyn Zehr comments on this momentous occasion. In 1967, the amalgamation of St. James United in Cross Lake with St. Paul's occurred and it became known as St. Paul and St. James United Church officially in 1995. The Madawaska and Whitney Charge left the Renfrew Presbytery in 1965 and joined the Maynooth and Lake St. Peter churches to become the Maynooth-Madawaska Charge under the Peterborough Presbytery. On Sept. 29, St. Paul and St. James United Church celebrated its 125th anniversary and its final regular service. Due to declining parishioner numbers and lack of funding, they're closing their doors and parishioners will now have to go down to Maynooth for services each Sunday. Reverend Marilyn Zehr has been reverend at the church in Madawaska since 2017 and told the attendees that as they celebrate the 125th anniversary of this small church, in this small community of Madawaska, they honour the many years of faithful service and praise. "Help us this afternoon to reflect back with clarity about all that deserves to be celebrated, all that deserves to be lamented, and all that deserves to be let go," she says. Zehr said she was delighted to see all the parishioners there that day, representing so many stories that are part of what this worshipful community was and is. "Your parents, grandparents, and probably great grandparents had a part in this community and making this church and this place what it has been. So it's lovely to see you all here to remember," she says. Jean Jessup, head of the United Church Women's League, said that they remember with gratitude those that came before and fulfilled his master's plan at this church here in Madawaska. "The pioneers such as the Taylors, the Camerons, the Hamiltons, that's only a few of the older ones. So let us keep these memories of the past, when we continue to move forward into the future," she says. Zehr said it was sad they had to close the doors to the church in Madawaska, but they are all still one. She then showed them a graphic of the Madawaska watershed, which incorporates all the churches in the Maynooth-Madawaska Pastoral Charge as a symbol of how they're all connected. "We can't restore the past, we can't restore what we once were. But together as one we can be part of a re-story, the story of what will be. All of us here and in Lake St. Peter, Whitney, Madawaska, Maynooth, we draw new lines of how we understand where we are from. And so that's why I wanted you to see this watershed," she says. Varying amounts of water were then brought up by the parishioners in containers from where they live, in places like the Madawaska River, Bark Lake, Popeye Lake, and several private residences' wells, and deposited into a large bowl on the altar at the front. This blended water was then redistributed to all the attendees with a pine cone seed from pinecones at the back of the church, in the hopes that

with the water and the seed, a new tree will grow and flourish at each parishioner's home, as a symbolic memory of the church in Madawaska. Several people shared memories of the church over the years. Carol Peterson, the organist at the church for the past seven years, remembered a time seven years ago at Christmastime. "I ran into Elvin Towns, who played organ at the church for 70 years but had a stroke and was no longer able to play. They found out I was a piano player and passed a message on asking if I'd be able to play, and I said yes. So that's my strongest memory," she says. Erin Crecelius, nee Morlock, sent a message from Ireland, which was read by Zehr. She said people are sharing their memories today about the United Church in Madawaska and she was thinking about what kind of advertisement she'd place if she had to sell it. "I think it would say; for sale, one used building, old, moved down to its foundations, but still standing tall. Because my first memories are of a lovely honest church building, wonderful acoustics, and full of history. Absolutely a reflection of the people who built it and still worship there. But my lasting memories will always be of Madawaska's deep connection and affection for St. Paul and St. James United Church, a building that has been used indeed and who can say how many found comfort and community in the last 100 plus years. I think of the people who came to the roast beef dinners, the Christmas services, Elvin's music, and a choir long after ours disappeared. Lent, maple syrup shared in little bottles and unique combination of keeping tradition and accepting change," she says. Reverend Audrey Lounder, now retired, was the reverend at St. Paul and St. James United Church from 2006 to 2009 and came back from New Brunswick specifically to celebrate the 125th anniversary and the final regular service at the church. She read the sermon during service and said it was a labour of love reading it at the final regular service at the church. "This is an amazing place and Elvin was a favourite. I didn't know he'd passed away until we started planning a couple of weeks ago and it was like what, he's not going to be there? My friends [musicians] Mark [McDowell] and Tannis [Spratt] knew Elvin from when I served here and they got along well. So, they wanted to honour him and be part of this service," she says. Lounder recalls some of her favourite memories of her time as reverend at the church from 2006 to 2009. "One of them, we had a church picnic in the back and we'd have a cherry pit spitting contest and we had a ball. An entire afternoon talking and playing, just having fun and being together. Elvin is another favourite memory of mine. He played the music the whole time I was here. At Christmas, the church filled and we had this extremely moving, special holy time together. I remember that. Another favourite is the outhouse. I came from the city and it was a new experience for me, but I adapted. I remember we'd have little craft sales in the back behind the church. There's a sense of the holy in this place. This is sacred space and is a very special place," she says. Zehr told Bancroft This Week that she thought the service went well and that she's always felt the Holy Spirit in the church in Madawaska and she felt it again today. "But that will go with us. And so, I guess what matters is that we gather, we experience it together, wherever we are. And we have been gathering in Maynooth every Sunday at 10 a.m. and we hope everyone will join us," she says. "We're still all together, even if we're not in this building."