

The Living Faith Story

The congregation of Riverbend United Church began meeting in a Junior High School Gym in 1980, supported by seed money from St. Paul's United Church, a neighbour in Edmonton. Since then, the congregation has been characterized by vibrant, exceptional faithful leadership, high social consciousness, generations of committed volunteers, a diverse and attractive music program, and an often commented on sense of fellowship and fun.

A major renovation, and expansion was completed on the building in 2014 allowing for increased community involvement (e.g. E2 Academy, a permanent renter), a school for "twice exceptional" children who do not thrive in the public school system, rental to a Ghanaian Methodist Church for worship and meetings, a 12-step group, dance and fitness classes and various community meetings. Energized by the Affirming Process, Riverbend became an Affirming Congregation in 2022 and remains committed to this way of "being church".

Members participate in Regional Council meetings and have served on General Council Committees. Riverbend United Church will host the 2025 Regional Council Meeting.

Collaboration with a neighbouring grassroots organization Riverbend ROCKS (Raising Our Kids Safely) has been an important aspect of our Social Justice commitments. We are excited by our involvement with this local subsidized housing community populated by many refugee and immigrant families of differing cultures and faiths. Shared meals and food preparation, tax preparation, workshops and ESL classes are some of the ways this involvement is witnessed.

This “work” is all about our Christian faith in that it is how we “be the church” without specifically evangelizing or patronizing in our community. We “witness the gospel” when we see the face of God in the faces of our very different neighbours!

A fairly large lay leadership group is very involved in programs, ministry planning and worship. The solo minister at Riverbend United Church is well supported by a Director of Music, choir, handbells and ensemble, Children’s ministry coordinator, Pastoral care coordinator, Youth Ministry coordinator and administrative staff. Expectations are high and met for ministerial staff to work with other staff positions and lay leaders.

Faith Formation

Faith Formation is supported through Sunday School and a Youth Group, meeting Sundays for discussion and bi-weekly for social activities. Children and youth participate occasionally in a leadership role in Worship services at Christmas, Easter and quarterly in a Community Worship service. All remain in the sanctuary and lay leaders lead worship, music provided by an Ensemble, musicians performing eclectic and popular music. Confirmation classes are held as needed, usually bi-annually. Book studies are held and usually well attended three times a year often with a focus on diverse ways of “being church”. Small groups are identified as important connection parts to the whole congregation.

Leadership

Monthly Board meetings support the Lay Leadership of the church and weekly staff meetings and staff. A belief in “the ministry of all” is firmly held with support from the minister with resources and expertise where needed. An example of ministerial/staff support can be found in the minister and organist taking an active membership (but not leadership) role in our Affirming Committee. The culture of the congregation remains strong, positive and open to conciliation and compromise. Conflict is remarkably limited to issues as opposed to personality and protection of this framework/culture is a high priority for leadership.

Educational leave for ministerial staff is budgeted and ministers are encouraged to take sabbaticals as appropriate.

Pastoral Care

A staff position of Pastoral Care coordinator has been filled following decades of employing a Parish Nurse. The coordinator works closely with the minister and a team of 10 to 12 volunteers providing phone contact and in person visiting. The coordinator also participates frequently in Worship. Current Pastoral Care coordinator is a retired RN. Special workshops are held in such areas as end of life care, and death and dying as needed.

Self Care

The congregation at Riverbend United Church is intentionally engaged in self-care through a weekly transitions group, a weekly walking group, a weekly crafting group, a men’s group, a community garden, and annual music nights with the congregation. These are used as

fundraisers by donation, extremely well attended and held at least annually. A quarterly newsletter runs a regular Health column. There is a conscious attempt to distribute the volunteer workload and involve new members in smaller groups (i.e. volunteering with young children and families in the Family Room) encouraging connection and participation.

Community Outreach

As mentioned, community outreach is a priority for Riverbend United Church. We have sponsored two refugee families over the years from Kosovo and Syria. We are in an ongoing relationship with a neighbourhood grassroots community organization and help support two downtown transition homes for women formerly living on the streets. There are regular drives for necessary items and food for the unhoused.

Decisions were intentionally made at the time of our renovation to expand the parking lot for safe community access to a large soccer field immediately adjacent to the church on a very busy road. The church building and roof is highly visible on a slight hill and our drive for funds to install solar panels was presented as more community engagement/outreach and was hugely successful.

Worship Questions

For our Sunday morning Worship, we use a variety of tools. Each Sunday, an order of service is printed, which is included in the Friday email sent to the members each week and is available to be viewed on our website from Friday onwards.

For the most part, we follow a traditional order of service. Hymns selected from with Voices United or More Voices United, with the occasional piece from another source or a more secular piece which lends itself well to that week's theme. There is a responsive call to worship and a unison opening prayer. During the sharing of joys and concerns/prayers of the people, there is an opportunity for silent reflective prayer. Four times a year we come together in a Whole Community Worship, where they worship together. There may be a scripture told in a godly play style, a children's book which helps to explain the theme, or a congregational activity e.g. we recently created a paperchain where we all had the opportunity to write a word to describe what we think being church means, which were then linked together as a reminder we are all connected.

Normally the sermon/reflection is delivered by one person, either the Minister or whoever is leading the worship that day. At least once a year we enjoy a short, themed series with Rev. Valerie in conversation/dialogue with a member of the faith community, which replaces any sermon/reflection. The expectation is that the sermon/reflection will be somewhere around 20 minutes. There are some references to renowned theologians, but for the most part, they steer away from the academic, to things more relatable to people in their everyday lives. Twice a year there is a book study before worship, where more academic/theological discussion can take place. Musically we are very strong with a handbell choir, a children's choir both of which play periodically, and Ensemble (guitars, drums etc.) which plays monthly, and for the rest of the time a choir, which can exceed 20 people, who lead the hymn singing, with an accompanist, on our new piano. We have an Anthem each week from either the choir or the Ensemble. From

time to time some of our other musically talented members will come and play on a specific week. This is all coordinated and organized by our Music Director. We project the lyrics onto the screen in the Sanctuary and each Sunday service is live streamed on the Riverbend United Church YouTube channel.

We hope that by having a mix of both traditional and modern worship styles we strike the right balance to appeal to younger families and to older members of the congregation. Our goal in worship is for everyone to feel connected to each other and to the Spirit. Together, we are exploring faith and engaging communities.

Traditionally, we have an older congregation with many retirees, however in the last few years (since COVID really) we have seen more young families join us in worship and have a busy children's ministry and nursery for little ones.