



The Value of Community

No one remembers exactly how it started and the records are long gone, but it was probably like so much else in Harrow, a small farming community in southwest Ontario, and in our parish, St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church. People knew each other and told their friends and neighbours that they wanted to do something, something organized and ongoing, to help those “falling through the cracks” ... the poor, the unemployed, the sick, the struggling.

And so, the effort to help began, with the Catholics in the lead, a small group of five – three “homemakers” and two “businessmen”. They were aided by the community’s longtime milkman and mayor, a staunch Catholic, known and liked by everyone. Word spread that they would accept donations, ask for what they needed, and help anyone in the community, even if they were not Catholic.

It didn’t take long for requests to come in and for the small group to grow, slowly because they met every week, required home visits and were sworn to confidentiality. But grow they did, and by the time my wife and I joined in 1999, the small group had been aggregated into the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul of Canada as the St. Anthony of Padua (Harrow) Conference, with headquarters in the basement of the rectory.

I remember going on my first home visit with a longtime member. We were delivering firewood to a small house on a country road not too far from where my family lived, but really in another world. Four men lived together and all struggled to get and keep employment, buy food, and stay warm. They tried to heat the house by picking up scraps of wood at a nearby lumber yard, which let them load the scraps on pallets and then would drop them off when making deliveries. It was a real eye opener ... and sobering. One of the men still comes to the food bank our Conference operates now.

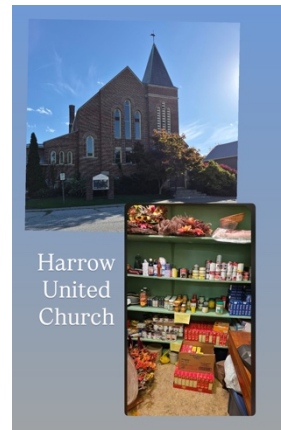
We got to know who else relied on such deliveries, who would donate firewood (such generous people!), and who could be counted on to help chop it. I was one of the younger guys then and I had a small trailer that was perfect for delivering firewood and picking up food donations, so I quickly got to know those who needed help and the broad network of people, churches, schools, organizations and businesses helping our SSVP Conference.



The annual community fair, now in its 172nd year, was involved early on – accepting canned goods and cash donations, sharing the collection from the Sunday morning ecumenical service, and delivering the food and cash to our headquarters. And it is a lot of food, which the young Mennonite pastor and his hockey team would sort, date and shelf with help from their church youth group.

One of the local sororities includes our “kids” in their Santa Sack program and matches the child’s needs and wants to their shopping list. Their faithfulness and generosity always bring smiles. And one year, the local O.P.P. detachment bought gift cards to Shoppers’ and Tim Horton’s for all our teenagers so they wouldn’t feel left out.

We have received birthday cake kits assembled by the Youth Ministry at the Anglican Church, funds raised by United Church Youth Group, school lunch items donated by the kids at the Baptist Church Vacation Bible School, donations from the Portuguese Club's annual Holy Spirit Festival and a winery's annual Festival of Ice, and large donations of canned goods and packaged food from our annual food drives at the elementary and high schools (public and Catholic). And many (the foot doctor, eye clinic, chiropractor, garden club, wineries, the Canadian Legion, the Kinsmen, the Knights of Columbus, the Rotary, the Seniors Card Club, the United Church Men's Baseball Team, the big steel company, and the small restaurant) let people know that they are collecting for us and/or that donating a food item(s) is the price of admission.



Harrow
United
Church



That Mennonite Church, which is tiny, accepts food and other donations for us now throughout the week – with a big sign out front when it is open. They make us a “special project”, donate generously, and its pastor sometimes attends our meetings. She has invited us to speak to her congregation and brought them to tour our food bank.

The Full Circle Thrift Shop, another Mennonite venture, shares its substantial earnings with us and other food programs and non-profits throughout our area generously year-after-year.

The Christmas season brings a marked increase in the amount and number of community donations, led by the Essex Region Goodfellows, all local firefighters and their supporters, who regularly supply a significant percentage of the money we need to operate. And the various churches each have an assignment to provide a specific item for each Christmas baskets – e.g. pancake mix, syrup, cranberry relish, cheese, etc.). The local fruit farm gives us a large bag of apples for each basket and winter squash. The baskets are a real community endeavour!

I haven't been able to list everyone who helps and supports our Conference or explain all that we do, but I have tried to describe the decades of steadfast, generous support from our community and its families, organizations and businesses.

We are truly blessed!

Mark LaBute, President

St. Anthony of Padua



Goodfellows Drive