

## **Sermon - Dec. 12, 2010**

*By The Rev'd Canon Dr. Lorne Mitchell*

From the very beginning, the story of St. James Church is woven into the larger story of Stratford itself. In each chapter of our story, people have had a vision and, with a leap of faith, have brought that vision to life.

In 1840, people started meeting and worshipping at the local hotel where Pazzo now exists. At that time there were only 50 residents in the settlement. It was a time when land was being cleared. Before there was ever a church building, the people of Stratford were burying their loved ones on the holy acre of land where St. James' now stands. As the town grew, and the railroad arrived, the people of this parish took a leap of faith: In 1870, they decided to build a beautiful neo-gothic church to better serve the growing community. Then, in 1909, they decided to complete the Bell tower and install a stunning set of chimes whose sounds could reach out to the entire community. After a 100 years we re-tuned those bells and now they sound better than ever.

As with every town in Canada, the two World Wars took a real toll on Stratford. Every family experienced loss and grief of some kind during that time. St. James' played a special role in the community during the war years. It was the home of the Perth Regiment and the spiritual centre of both the grieving and the celebrating for soldiers and their families. To this day the Colours of the Perth Regiment hang proudly in the Nave of St. James' Church.

Another important chapter in the story of St. James' started in 1953 with the whole idea of having a major Shakespeare Festival. Tom Patterson, who grew up near St. James, had the full support and enthusiasm of the Rector of St. James', Archdeacon Lightbourne. Many a rehearsal was held in the Upper Parish Hall including training for sword fights. And so started a long relationship between the Festival and St. James.

But the world of 2010 is vastly different from the world of 1909, 1918 and 1953. And so now, once again, St. James' finds itself ready to begin a new chapter. While cherishing and celebrating the gifts of the past, it is time to lay out a clear strategy for St. James so that all can participate and share in its future. Over the past year, parishioners have been working on a strategic plan to do just this. After months of surveys, meetings, discussions and prayer, the parishioners identified a vision statement that seems to capture the essence of where we are and where we are called to be:

St. James'... Exploring, Sharing and Celebrating the love of God in the community in word and deed.

I'd like to share briefly, some reflections on this Vision statement. The words **exploring, sharing and celebrating** seem to capture three major parts of our Faith, Worship and Ministry at St. James', namely the importance of Education, Outreach and Arts and Culture.

**First the theme of Exploring (Our Education)**

The theme of *exploring* is meaningful today because, St James is a progressive Christian faith community. We value good education and so we value exploring all the ways in which our Christian faith and our society can both support and challenge one another. We are committed to maintaining this environment of exploration and discovery for our children and one another.

**Second the theme of Sharing (Our Outreach)**

St. James is a leader in the Stratford community. We are committed to putting our faith into action by listening, identifying and responding to social concerns in our wider community and the world. We feel called to do this by building partnerships with other groups and therefore strengthening the network of people working to better the local and global community. Examples of this are Meals on Wheels, L'Arche, The Foodbank, Community Meals and the Simple Gifts program.

**Finally there is the theme of Celebrating (Our Arts and Culture)**

As I already mentioned, from its early days, St. James' has been a home for *Arts and Culture* in Stratford. It might be an organ concert, a Choral Evensong, a Bell Chimes concert, The CBC Reading of A Christmas Carol, A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, Stratford Summer Music, Loreena McKennett, The Split Peas, or any number of other concerts or events. These are just a sampling of the ways St. James has been an important place to celebrate the Arts and Culture in our community. We are committed to ensuring that this strengthens and continues into the next generation of Stratford.

These are just some initial reflections I offer today. I encourage everyone to take a good look at the Strategic Plan that was presented to Parish Council last month - copies are available at the back of the church. Together, we will ensure that the love of God is experienced in this place for generations to come.

Amen.