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CITY OF REFUGE

The New (Ab)normal

By: Kathleen Smith,
Donor Relations Coordinator



Although it still feels like the world has been turned upside down, the new routines and ways of doing things that we've adopted during the pandemic are starting to feel, if not easier, at least somewhat familiar. It's our new (ab)normal.

In this edition of City of Refuge, we wanted to share the new (ab)normal of pandemic life at Sanctuary. In *The View from Here* (pg. 2), Greg Paul paints a picture of how COVID-19 has changed our community. Read Donald's reflections on life in Sanctuary's kitchen, where our dedicated crew has been preparing more than 1,000 meals per week to keep their community fed during lockdown (pg. 4). Check out Sam's update on what worship has looked like for the past year (pg. 7) and join Ale to explore the ways that our community has continued to create and share art (pg. 6-7). We've also shared some of our favorite snapshots from last year's outdoor Christmas party (pg. 3 and 5—not to be missed!), and Alan has provided an update on our finances (pg.8).

Although our community faced many unique challenges in 2020, the sad reality is that many of the dangers and struggles that our friends on the street have had to contend with these past few months existed long before COVID-19 reached Toronto. **The pandemic certainly exacerbated existing problems, from the overcrowded shelter system to the overdose crisis. But sadly, there is nothing “abnormal” about many of the challenges our community faced in 2020.** For years now, our friends have been pushed out of their homes and neighborhoods by gentrification, harassed for using public spaces, unable to access safe shelter, and dying from preventable overdoses.

If there has been a “silver lining” to COVID-19, it has been that these crises have been made much more visible to the broader community. Here at Sanctuary, we are deeply grateful for folks, like you, who saw the needless suffering of our homeless and poor neighbours and responded with compassion and generosity. We long for the day when we can safely throw open our doors to welcome you for a meal, a concert, an art show, or even just to hang-out. We see everyone who supports us—whether by making a gift, saying a prayer, calling up your city councillor, or sharing a post on social media—as part of our community. We hope you enjoy this newsletter as a way of getting a deeper glimpse into what we're up to, and we wish you all the best for this new year.



The View From Here

By: Greg Paul, Pastor

It's been called "The New (Ab)Normal": staff members goggled and gowned; community contract workers – a new thing in itself – likewise; meals served outside regardless of weather; five-at-a-time indoor drop-ins; entry, exit and cleaning protocols; the entire main floor auditorium given over to just six sleeping mats, with access routes taped on the floor to ensure proper distancing. Port-a-potties lined up outside. Cooking, health care and arts activities that have become almost comically convoluted. Sunday worship is entirely online.

The description of changes could go on and on. Beyond logistical issues, some of them are truly dire: overdoses are way up; evictions and the dismantling of encampments continue apace; survival resources for homeless people are drastically reduced; testing is inadequate and shelter options are largely unsafe and inhumane.

There are bright spots here and there. Sanctuary's Christmas Feast was served outside this year, under strings of lights and ornaments, with live music piped in. (Sam was performing from inside, where his fingers wouldn't freeze on the frets.) Rumour has it that spontaneous dancing broke out. Some gifts were distributed. For most who came, that was it – that was Christmas. Actual COVID-19 cases in our community have been astonishingly low; a testament, I believe, to the safety of encampments relative to the shelter system, and the early, consistent and very thorough protocols enacted by Sanctuary staff.

Some of these things are merely logistical puzzles. Others represented heightened dangers in the already precarious lives of our friends. There is, however, a deeper "abnormal" hiding beneath the fraught surface.

Sanctuary has always been, first and foremost, a community. That means that relationship is the currency of all our work and activities. Real relationship, the kind that grows, strengthens and deepens, takes time – especially when the experience of most is that trust will be betrayed. For almost three decades now, we've been trying to nurture a community in which people who have been shoved out elsewhere can find a home.

A place of safety, dignity and increasing health. At any given time, that community has been made up of several hundred souls, many of whom have been around for years and years and claimed Sanctuary as their own.

The pandemic has changed that. Many of our people have been dispersed. There's been an influx of new people who used to rely on other programs that have been shut down; understandably, they often arrive with a sceptical attitude that can be downright adversarial and was the exception rather than the rule among us. It feels like almost all of the "elders" of our street community have died in the last couple of years. The slow-growth trust we've tended and tilled for so long has been uprooted. Sanctuary has been forced to become more like an agency and less like a community; service provision has of necessity nudged relationship out of its vivifying centrality.

We know this isn't forever. This abnormal cannot become our new normal. We long to regain our identity as a community where hugs are to be had in profusion. (Never underestimate the healing power of hugs.) Where relational authority – the authority of love – can step between combatants and bring about peace. Where the trust inherent in deep friendship will help someone to be able to receive the care he or she needs. Where the flow of that caregiving does not recognize the finer distinctions of community member, staff, volunteer and so on.

None of these characteristics have disappeared entirely, of course. But we do understand that, out of the wreckage of this bizarre pandemic era, a certain amount of starting over will be required. Much as we might long to go back to what was, a new way of being will have to emerge. At this point, we don't even know what that will look like.

We do, however, know who will lead the way.

The prophet Isaiah urged the people of God to strike off the chains of the oppressed, feed the hungry, house the homeless and return dignity to those who had been stripped of it. But he also made it clear that it was those very same formerly crushed and rejected people who would rebuild the ruins, repair what had been broken, and restore devastated streets as places where people could make a home.

That's who will lead us, too – the prophets of the streets, alleys, encampments and squats.

Christmas 2020



the **KITCHEN**

By: Donald Sturrock and Kathleen Smith

If you've ever visited Sanctuary, you'll know that the busy, steaming, comforting, clattering, hollering, and laughing heart of our space is the community kitchen where Donald and his crew prepare our weekly community meals. Donald, who has been our kitchen manager for 18 years (!), sees his work as a calling. "I believe in people having a real meal," he explains. "We put love in our food. We have people sit down, and eat, and break bread with them." Meals at Sanctuary are typically served "family style," with platters placed on each table and passed around. Our staples are hearty, comfort-food favorites, and for special occasions we pull out all the stops with treats like roast beef, braised lamb, and turkey dinners.

"I believe in people having a real meal"

But our meals are about so much more than just food. As Donald puts it: "So much in our community extends from the kitchen." There is no better way to build a friendship and to break down barriers than to share a meal. So many of our most precious and unusual friendships have started over a steaming hot plate of eggs and hash-browns, or a slab of tuna casserole.

Sanctuary's kitchen also offers a space for street-involved folks to volunteer preparing and serving meals. Donald has a very particular approach to working with our volunteers. "I facilitate the kitchen. I empower people. I want them to feel that this is their kitchen also, that I'm not "their boss.""

This approach is reflected in all our work at Sanctuary. We do our best to redistribute power from those who have plenty to those who have little. Most of the folks volunteering in our kitchen have experienced a lot of rejection and have often been made to feel like they don't have anything to offer. Donald's favorite part of his job is getting to see these same people build skills, explore their true potential, and grow as confident community leaders.

Obviously, COVID-19 has changed a lot about how Sanctuary's kitchen and meals operate. Most meals are served take-out style, and we can only have five people downstairs at a time. It's been tough to try to maintain our spirit of friendship, welcome, and community with all the infection control precautions in place. But even behind the facemasks and the new restrictions, Sanctuary's kitchen remains a source of comfort, friendship, and empowerment.

In the first week of the pandemic, John*, a seasoned kitchen volunteer, was working with Dusty*, one of our newer volunteers (thanks to our generous supporters, all our "volunteers" are now paid staff!). Dusty was feeling anxious about her new role and apologized over and over again for mistakes she thought she'd made. At one point she was almost in tears, feeling like she wasn't doing well enough and had let the team down.

"So much in our community extends from the kitchen"



There was a time when John might have been really frustrated or irritated by Dusty's anxiety. When he first started coming around, he was homeless and had developed, as a necessity of survival, a pretty tough persona. Over the years, he was able to overcome some huge personal challenges and these days he has a place of his own and takes pride in his work as one of Sanctuary's most experienced kitchen volunteers.

John went up to Dusty, and instead of being short with her, he adopted a gentle tone and said "If you're doing something wrong, we'll tell you. Otherwise, you don't have to worry. You're doing great." The two of them have now been working together for nearly a year, and if you stand just outside the kitchen door you can hear their funny, friendly back-and-forth as they work away to feed their hungry friends.

A lot has changed around here, but, in many ways, the kitchen is still the busy, steaming, comforting, clattering, hollering, and laughing heart of our space.



SEEKING...

Are you...

...an excellent communicator?

...passionate about issues of justice in our city?

...interested in cultivating friendships within a vibrant and diverse community?

...inspired by your Christian faith to be in community with folks who are poor and marginalized?

...interested in hearing more about the Sanctuary way of doing all of this?

Sanctuary is looking to hire someone to join our staff team to be involved in our everyday work, while also leading our communications with those who support us financially. Along with a general ability to work within the Sanctuary community, we are looking for someone with excellent administrative, organizational and communication skills.

If you or someone you know might be qualified and interested, please e-mail info@sanctuarytoronto.ca for more information.

ART ^{in the} TIME OF COVID

By Alejandra Adarve

Yurni loves painting purple hearts. Adrianna loves singing *Shallow* when the night falls on Charles Street. Kendall loves teaching people how to pour paint and, lately, making papier-mâché birdhouses. Traci dreams of starring in a musical. Jay loves sketching wolves. Frank loves dancing in New York City.

Before the world stopped its course in March of 2020, our lives used to be filled with the things we love.

We used to meet in the basement every Monday at 1:30pm and fill the room with loud hellos and stories from everyone's week. A painting always needed to be found, and we would have the regular talk about the brushes being too thick or too thin or too long. Froggie would ask us to print a photo of a frog, someone needed to find a book, old and new friends would sit together to paint, talk, share their time and their laughter.



Everything changed when we learned about a deadly virus that could spread easily unless we stayed 6 feet apart from each other, masked and isolated. We abruptly closed our program, thinking some terrible months were ahead... No one ever imagined it would be a whole year before we could even talk about going back to normal. Trying to be candid, we started calling this era the "new normal." Everyone tried to stay positive in the beginning, I even learned how to bake sourdough bread and allowed long telephone calls back into my life. When that fell short, we had zoom workshops and zoom parties. And then that fell short too. That's when we landed in the "new ab-normal."

By July, we were tired of missing each other and decided to move our workshop to Allan Gardens. Buckets of canvases, brushes, paint and pizza now filled our Wednesdays. Art in the Park was a joy for all of us. We were lucky to have a few happy afternoons before we had to go back into a lockdown.

In November, we still couldn't sit together or get too close to each other, but Scotty spent the entire night of our last Sunday drop-in of 2020 painting on a canvas that he placed on the sidewalk. A few days later, Jay showed me a drawing of a wolf he had been working on all morning and I felt that the wolf looked pensive and calm.

At Sanctuary we empower our friends to do the things they love and fuel their lives with the kind of possibilities that just wouldn't be possible without love.

We will stay here through it all.



Worship Updates

By: Sam Sundar-Singh

Every Sunday since March 2020, we've gathered online to stay connected through worship. For anyone not familiar with this concept, it's sort of like sports fans bonding over a game that everyone is watching together, in different places. It's all very unusual and strange - which says a lot for a group of unusual and strange people!

This has become our new (ab)normal.

One of the hallmarks of worship at Sanctuary is spontaneous community involvement. There is space for everyone to add their voice - song selection, scripture reading, sharing, praying, communion, commentary, etc. I feel that this makes room for a more 'Spirit-led', community-directed, worship time.

I've tried to facilitate this in a virtual manner with video, audio, and text contributions from our community, but none of that is spontaneous. The things that come closest are the comments during the livestream. We have just started using Zoom for our services, so hopefully there will be more community involvement.

It's certainly not the same as when we are all in the same physical space, but, despite the distance, we still feel connected when we all sing together, participate in Communion together, and pray together. This is because we are all connected spiritually, which transcends any physical distance.

I am grateful for the technology and resources that are available, but unfortunately, not everyone has access. We do our best to include everyone we can. Some join in on the phone, others may share a device.

Ultimately, our connection through worship isn't, and has never been, about a building or location. We are one because of our connection with God, our Creator.

We are all hopeful that we will be able to meet in person again soon, and very soon



If you want to join us on Sundays at 5:05pm, check out our "Sanctuary Toronto Worship" page on Facebook (or use this link: <https://tinyurl.com/stsunday>). You don't have to have a Facebook account to participate, and you can join anonymously.

Financial Update

By: Alan Beattie,
Executive Director

Wow! I am utterly astonished! As we responded to the needs of our community during COVID in 2020, our expenses ballooned by almost half a million dollars! But you - our friends, supporters, donors - rose to the occasion, giving generously and sacrificially and thereby making it possible for us to cover all of those expenses and more. There are no words for the gratitude that we all feel for your commitment to this community. Thank you!

As we enter 2021, it is no secret that we are not yet out of the woods with this pandemic and there are still challenging days ahead of us. Because of your abundant generosity last year, we feel prepared to face those challenges with confidence in our financial position. That is a tremendous relief for us.

We will continue to look to you, our faithful friends and donors, for the ongoing financial, emotional and spiritual support that you have provided to us - both individually and collectively - in the past. We look forward to being able to offer meaningful practical care to so many in our Sanctuary community and knowing that we are able to do so because of God's provision through you. Thank you again!

Ways to Help *Pray, pray, pray!*

Board Members

Alison Marthinsen

Pamela Thomson

Janice Towndrow

Cindy Quinton

Joanna Moon

Michael Blair

Simon Beck

Sylvia Keesmaat

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By credit card: donate.sanctuarytoronto.ca

By automatic monthly debit: complete the form at tinyurl.com/sanctuaryPAG

*By cheque or money order payable to Sanctuary Ministries of Toronto
Mail to 25 Charles Street East, Toronto, ON M4Y 1R9*

For US Donors, by cheque or money order payable to First Church of the Nazarene
Mail to Sanctuary c/o Radical Mission, 150 Richview Road, Clarksville, TN 37043
Attn: Leighanne Guthrie

Donate A Car Canada! Sanctuary can benefit from your donation of any kind of vehicle (cars, trucks, vans, SUVs, motorcycles, boats, RVs) to be recycled in an environmentally friendly manner! Not only that, but if you have a newer or estate vehicle that you would like to donate, they have selling agents to assist in maximizing your donation. Simply go to www.donatecar.ca or call them at 1-877-250-4904.

Tax receipts for all eligible gifts will be sent at year end (charitable# 89037 9340 RR 0001).

Other Ideas

Raise awareness by showing this newsletter to your friends and family.

Commemorate special people and occasions by donating to Sanctuary 'in honour of...'

Invite Sanctuary to speak at your church, school or group meeting.

Follow us online and share our posts with your friends and family.

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