

Historic St. Ola United Church needs major repairs



By Mike Riley

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A church in St. Ola, down in Limerick Township is in major need of repairs to not only remain viable as a place of worship and community gathering place but to stay standing. Established in 1888, this church has borne witness to many community events over the past 134 years. Residents are looking at a myriad of ways to fund a restoration to keep the St. Ola United Church in the community for many more years.

The unfortunate condition of this historic church in St. Ola was posted on the Bancroft and Area History Facebook page on March 23 and on the Old Hastings Mercantile and Gallery Facebook page the same day.

One year after Limerick Township was incorporated, construction on the St. Ola church was started, and was completed in 1889. The church's congregation dates back to 1871. Originally a Methodist church, the church became a United church in 1925 and 41 years later joined the Coe Hill and The Ridge Pastoral Charge.

Bryan Kernohan is an engineer in Minden who is the principal at Bryan Kernohan Engineering. At the behest of Coe Hill resident

Gail Nicol, he conducted a preliminary inspection of the church on Oct. 16, 2021 to determine if there were obvious visually apparent structural issues without uncovering the internal structural components. Gary Pattison, who owns the Old Hastings Mercantile and Gallery with his wife Lillian says that the congregation decided to reach out for an engineer's assessment because the interior walls were looking very threatening; the plaster was cracking and breaking and there were bulges indicating the support of the roof might be failing. He says that the decision to have this assessment done most likely would have been made by Jim Polmateer and Arnie Nicol, Gail's husband, who he says are kind of the church leaders of the small congregation.

Kernohan said in his report, dated Nov. 24, 2021, that the roof structure of the church has a wooden truss with a steel bottom rod acting as a bottom tension chord, spaced 12 to 13 feet apart. The load acting on the wall at the bearing locations would be in excess of 11,000 pounds at each support, using the climate data from the Ontario Building Code. At the northwest end of the church, Kernohan found significant deterioration in the truss and it was crushing its support. He also found significant crushing and some rotation of the exterior support wall, which was manifest by cracking and bulging on the northeast end of the church. The four corners of the stone foundation with partial mortar joints have failed and need repair, and he also found evidence of mould and mildew in the building due to a lack of moisture control. Despite all the deficiencies in the building, he did say that the floor joists were in good shape.

A further inspection was recommended by Kernohan, one that would require the walls to be opened up to check internal structures. He also strongly suggested that the windows be located away from bearing parts of any load bearing members and the walls should be fixed in those locations, the building should be heated with an HVAC system to control moisture (thus eradicating the prospect of mould and mildew coming back), and longer steel plates should be attached to the truss rods to distribute the weight load over a larger area (depending upon what is found when the walls are opened up in a subsequent inspection).

Based on this preliminary inspection, Kernohan came to the following conclusion about the church;?It is my view that the walls may have deteriorated to the extent that the building could fail at any time. It is imperative that any further inspections and analysis be conducted before any activities are conducted,? he says.

Pattison posted on his business' Facebook page that it was sad to report that the church ?was in serious decline and in danger of being lost forever.? In addition to reporting on its sad state, the Pattisons were looking for solutions to help the church stay standing and even reclaim its former glory. Comments soon came flooding in on Facebook with memories about the church and suggestions on how to procure the funds necessary to refurbish it. They suggested a GoFundMe campaign, looking into various levels of government funding, asking other larger local churches for assistance, contacting the United Church of Canada and even chipping in themselves with materials and labour. If you'd like to help out or have a suggestion for funding to facilitate the church renovation, contact Gary and Lillian Pattison on their Old Hastings Mercantile and Gallery Facebook page or at www.oldhastingsgallery.ca/contact/.

While many folks in the area no doubt have abundant memories of the St. Ola church and the special place it has held in their lives over the years, Pattison also has his own memories of the church, including one very special one; he met his wife Lillian there back in 1992.

?She was singing at a St. Ola anniversary service in 1992 with her vocal trio Close Enough. St. Ola is part of a Pastoral Charge that includes The Ridge, which is my church and St. Andrew's in Coe Hill. I saw her singing at that service and asked a minister for an introduction, being a musician myself. I suggested that the trio could sing something at the Ridge church and that I could add brass as backing instruments. I figured that was as good as any reason to ask for her contact information. Well, I managed to lose that phone number, until a year later, the trio was singing at St. Andrew's anniversary service. This time, I made sure to hang on to that number! he says. ?And, 30 years later, here we are.?