

Church Visitor Visit – Bethel CRC ACTON – 5 May 2025

Rev. Victor Laarman & Rev. John Vanderstoep

We arrived to an active church building with many volunteers readying approximately 70 bicycles for a community bicycle giveaway happening that week—something Bethel CRC has done approximately four times before. There was a wonderful positive energy in the building, in the council room, and, we were to find out, was reflective of the healthy ministry happening here.

Following Rev. Martin Dam's guidance as this was our first normal Church Visit for both of us, we used four "arrows" to frame discussing the directions of ministry – up (worship and sacraments), down (preaching and leadership), in (discipleship and care), and out (mission and community). This allowed us to elicit stories from all areas of the church life and helped us to get a fleshed-out picture of the life of the church. For the purpose of this report, we will follow the structure of the four arrows and share highlight stories within each.

Upward Arrow: Worship & Sacraments

Officers were quick to point out that worship – both song and preaching – is a real strength for Bethel. Many stories were told that demonstrate a well-led congregational effort at praising God in song through multi-generational and multi-genre musical accompaniment. During their time of "vacancy" it was felt that their worship times were the glue which held the congregation together and were evidences of Christ's care and the Spirit's work. Stories of a 10-year-old guitarist and 13-year-old drummer and new members being encouraged to use their gifts in worship were highlights. Celebrating communion seven times per year is the norm and baptisms are being done as requested with a number of professions of faith, baptisms happening as a result of new member classes. While Bethel has ongoing discussions about worship style, this is seen as a reflection of what people are passionate about and is not interpreted or experienced as divisive. Bethel has been intentional about discerning whether their worship is forming disciples of Jesus and recently did a survey on this asking people how the service helps them connect with God.

Downward Arrow: Preaching & Leadership

Much appreciation for Pastor Hoekema's preaching was voiced from his pre-sermon pondering questions, to his ability to hold the attention of GEMS and Cadets, to the way in which his sermons draw the listener into the text to be changed. While Pastor Hoekema named his need to grow in adding visuals to his messages more often, some officers suggested that this was not needed. The search team had made preaching strength a focus and testimony that Pastor Hoekema preaches the text and makes it clear demonstrate that this is happening.

Pastor Hoekema, who is just six months new to Bethel, is profoundly thankful for Bethel and really senses that the Spirit is present, that the congregation wears their faith on their sleeves, and that Bethel is a great church with an active building and excellent staff. He is also realistic that there are challenges, mostly interpersonal within the congregation and can be expected of a large church but that the church is healthy.

The Council meets six times per year and within Council has a Ministry Board which meets 11 times per year for the executive functions of the church. This year they were able to have more names than needed to stand for officebearer, and with Pastor Hoekema's help, were able to sign the Covenant for Officebearers. While the four years of vacancy were a real challenge, they are very thankful to have a full staff. They also give thanks for the surge of visitors every Sunday and for membership classes which enfold new members from many directions.

Inward Arrow: Community, Discipleship, & Care

In response to the question of what their method of discipleship is and whether it was working, we heard folks name the many different ministries of the church and how they draw people in and into a deeper walk

with God. They encourage people to participate in the programs that go deeper than simply the Sunday morning service, such as Coffee Break, Small Groups, Bible Studies, Youth Group, Junior Youth, Cadets, GEMS, Tuesday night prayer, Thursday night Catechism, study groups who meet to discuss the sermon after the morning service, and more.

In terms of caring for people, in addition to small groups, they name intergenerational groups, and pastoral care being done on a needs-based model by the elders. They were able to name that people do fall through the cracks and that they could grow in reaching out to those who stray away and to those who grieve. They were also honest about asking whether they truly are a praying church still or if that was something that was truer in their past and needed renewal for. They named some of the unorthodox ways of involving people such as the bicycle-giveaway was an example of inviting otherwise uninvolved members to use their gifts repairing bikes. All of this was balanced against the enthusiasm of 60 people joining the church through five membership classes during the vacancy. They also said that one of the ways they care for members is by making sure the ministries are safe, enforcing their safe-church policy and even making building renovations comply with Safe Church in mind.

It was refreshing hearing the deacons speak candidly about their work, taking seriously their stewardship of the benevolence funds, naming that they sometimes feel ill-equipped to know how to handle questions and circumstances which come their way as they address complex needs in the church and community. They highlighted the joys of ministries like the fall-clean up where they were partnering with other churches to help people who couldn't do yard work as well as the Senior's Lunch. They also named the importance of working as a team and balancing the wisdom of experienced deacons with the enthusiasm of newer ones.

Outward Arrow: Mission & Community

Bethel is known throughout the community of Acton and is a "go-to" community when folks in Acton know that they need help. They really focus on the community, knowing they are there to "shine his light and show his love" in all they do. They name this as their reason for existence. In Bethel's visioning process a few years ago, they paid attention to partnering with other organizations and put in place a Community Life Coordinator. One visible example is the Bethel Coffee Trailer which the church brings to every event in the community and which a number of officebearers testified was a highlight way to serve and interact in the community. They see 90 men come each month for a men's breakfast. They had three officebearers at the table who told stories of how they were warmly welcomed and enfolded – one through the ministry of Coffee Break and two others who were invited to join a Small Group on their first Sunday at the church. Bethel are the hosts of the annual unity service for Acton churches and beyond that do invite folks engaged in global mission – such as Impact Zambia – to help turn their attention there, too.

We rounded out our visit by asking if there was anything they wished we asked about but didn't. They wondered out loud about the HSR. As a church, Bethel is not "drawing a line in the sand" and that they are laying low on the issue, naming that God has been good to them on this and that they have been able to take a low-profile as this is not a contentious issue in the congregation. They named that they are still dialoguing on the issue and that they neither want to bury nor blow up the issue, naming that it is healthy to talk about it without it becoming the main thing.

Summary:

All in all, it was a very positive Church Visit. As Church Visitors, we invite Classis to give thanks for the healthy, growing ministry of Bethel CRC. God has brought them through some challenges of a vacancy and they are in a very good place right now. Not that they are perfect, in fact, one of their signs of health was their ability to name ways they could grow without the naming of those weaknesses being a threat to the harmony and peace they are experiencing. For any congregation looking for help with their worship team, with their enfolding process, and with their posture as existing for the community, we encourage you to strike up conversations with Bethel CRC. May the fruit being born there catalyze greater health throughout our classis.