

Classis Huron - Bridge Report - September 2024

It has been over 9 years since August of 2015 when God first called me to serve as the Pastor at the Fergus Church Plant. You recognized that call as a Classis and through our calling church, New Life CRC in Guelph, extended the official call, uncertain of what The Bridge would become. When we came we had a glimpse of what God had in store, but we didn't then see what we see now. We thought that I would preach each Sunday, that we'd gather a band and develop programs and develop critical mass to afford to keep going and paying me as the staff person and any other expenses we might have. We hoped we might be self-sustaining by me dropping to 75% salary and maybe, just maybe, we would be able to gather enough people and fundraise enough to be able to sustain the long work of living on mission and making disciples and loving our neighbours as Jesus would. In other words, we thought we might look like a River City or The Journey.

Early on we committed to not having a building, not having programs, and simply focussing on learning how to make disciples who serve their community and love their neighbours. Though we have seen many people join and then leave The Bridge after a season, two families in particular have been key people of peace at the Bridge – the Louter and Kabbes families – who knew that God was also calling them to help shape whatever The Bridge would become. We experimented early with worship and a meal biweekly on Sunday nights, then Saturday nights, then eventually shifting to weekly on Sunday mornings. We met for a time in one of our local partner churches – Grace – who lent their space to us for free and hosted monthly meals for folks on the margins out of another Fergus church, Melville. During the pandemic, we delivered 500 meals per week to those who voiced a need, in cooperation with a few other Fergus/Elora churches, a restaurant and a bar. We have also learned to love our neighbours and example to our members how to do the same. Some of my closest friends live on my street and they are not my projects. I love them.

Through the years we have had mid-week discipleship for the members of the Bridge, using curriculum from "Gravity Leadership" (now "Gravity Commons"), we have engaged the tools of Church Renewal and brought members of the Bridge and other pastors in our classis and denomination to Church Renewal conferences in Winnipeg, and we have hosted a Generous Space support group for anyone who identified themselves as being anywhere on the Christian and/or LGBTQ spectrum. All of these efforts have had one focus: to help others follow Jesus.

It was September 2019 when Classis Funding for The Bridge ended. It was January 2020, right at the beginning of the pandemic, when I began earning all of my income for ministry through selling real estate. And so it is nearly five years that we have been living out this ministry by God's grace and provision without Classis' help other than the odd collection for the Bridge in lieu of being paid to preach at Classis churches. It was just two years later that you as a classis delegated me to Synod 2022 where it became clear that substantive changes were happening in our denomination that signaled that the Bridge might not be able to find a safe home here and for the past two years this has grieved me greatly, not simply for the personal loss and sadness but even more because I was reflecting on what I was learning about meeting God on the margins and among the rejected, and now I was seeing my denomination reject a whole group of people I am experiencing as friends and sincere followers of Jesus.

Five years into this chapter, we are not only financially healthy with charitable status and a Board of Directors (though offerings are always appreciated :)), we are developing healthy followers of Jesus among those who might formally have seen themselves as people on the margins. We thank God for the

work of the Spirit developing sincere faith in our community. A few stories from this past month to end the report and help you “see” what we see:

- Recently, a pastor couple from the UCC joined The Bridge. After their first Sunday morning with us, they reported back to us: “You are a beautiful group of Jesus followers!”; We also got to witness this same pastoral couple be welcomed by a lesbian member of the Bridge who knew herself to be an included part of the community who could then extend that inclusion to others.
- Recently, a divorcee was going to spend the day with her ex-husband and daughter and invited the Bridge to pray that she might experience the presence of Jesus as she went. We prayed specifically that she would experience the “walking on the water” character of Jesus in the midst of her relational storm. She reported afterward, “...thank you for all your support and prayers....it was a blessed day. We couldn’t solve all the problems but my relationship with my daughter....has improved significantly! Praise the Lord!”
- Recently a young mother related challenges with her 3-year-old who was being mean and how that affected her and knowing how important it is to centre our identity in Jesus and not in “being perceived to be a good mom.” When she shared this, a grandmother in our community shared that she had the same struggle except with a grandchild. Together we talked about the ways our identity in Christ can come under attack and how to remind ourselves whose we are. It was beautiful!
- Every Sunday morning, our community comes together for worship, either at our home or the home of one of the other members. We begin with an informal time of coffee, tea, juice, and whatever treats people bring, usually lasting about 30 minutes before the worship leader begins playing guitar and we transition into whichever space we will be worshipping in – a great room, a back deck or the same place we gathered for fellowship, it varies. We typically sing three or four songs, interspersed with Scripture and prayer, very similar to a typical reformed liturgy without announcing it as such. We open Scripture together, usually guided to the text highlighted that Sunday by “Seeking God’s Face” a devotional that we provide and promote and that some use. Though I prepare for the text through study and the gathering of what would otherwise be sermon illustrations, we approach the text conversationally, always asking those present what they are hearing Jesus say to them through the text and what they will do about it. We expect that God is present and at work and experience this regularly. We typically transition from Scripture and Jesus’ impact on us to our prayer requests where one member recently said, “we are more of a church of kleenex than peppermints.” Often we share communion with all participating. We close with praise, more socializing, sometimes hanging out together or seeing people off as they head into their day. It is like we are a family.

To close, a few reflections. The vision for The Bridge is to continue ministering to those who attend our worship and community events, to love (and not “project”) our neighbours, and to follow Jesus faithfully. I continue to experience God’s unique call on me to lead this community and pray that you as a Classis continue to support our calling church, New Life, in their support of me and The Bridge. I know that some of the things we do and the way that we do them are unique and may be difficult for you to appreciate at first blush. Feel free to reach out at any time (johnvanderstoep@gmail.com or 226-343-5959) and I will be glad to chat. Though I did send a report in February 2024 which somehow did not get to you, I understand that its absence and mine during the May Classis when I was walking the Camino with my son may have left you feeling under communicated to. Please feel free to reach out at any time.

In Christ, John Vanderstoep, Planter, The Bridge, Centre Wellington

