

Faith, a gift to the community

By Doug Skeates

The meaning of Christmas varies, a religious event for some, a national holiday for others. The act of gift giving is common within Canadian society as a whole. The value of faith communities, both in terms of worshipers and their institutions, tend to be overlooked as significant municipal components.

The importance of faith, i.e. members of churches, mosques, temples, etc., has diminished, especially in population centres, in modern times. At one time Toronto was known as a city of churches where even the sidewalks were claimed to be rolled up every Sunday. Telephone poles near worship centers were painted as streetcar stopping points. Once society consisted of weekdays for employment with Saturdays dedicated primarily for shopping or recreational opportunities and Sundays dedicated for church or a day of rest. Gambling was illegal, as was stores being open for shopping on Sundays or holy days.

Things have changed. Families rely on both husband and wife having jobs in order to support a home and transportation. Businesses often require employees to be available 24/7. Sundays appear to have become practice time for children's soccer or hockey etc. Many stores are open 24 hours a day, let alone weekends. Gambling now is not only legal but a significant source of revenue for both the private sector and governments. For families to fill employment requirements 24/7 late evenings or Sundays are needed for at least one member to do the shopping. Time is limited time for attending faith structures which now serve both religious purposes and meeting spaces for large gatherings in communities, a necessary municipal component. Society has moved relentlessly towards a more secular structure.

In the past religious denominations emphasized social action, manning of hospitals, orphanages, schools and other educational centers. While secular society has taken over responsibility for many of these functions, gaps exist. Money-oriented social structures have left many people behind. Sexual orientation is a source of severe controversy; mental health challenges afflict thousands; the gap between rich and poor; disaster relief, refugees, the list goes on.

Each is a social concern needing to be addressed if not by existing power structures, industry and governments, then by other means. The role of faith communities, locally, nationally and globally, is largely underrated. Solutions are best expressed at the community level where people live and are striving to find answers. One major example is the subject of mental health. An article in the October issue of Broadview features efforts of a Catholic church in Geel, Belgium dealing with the problem. Church members have opened their doors and their hearts to folk with a wide range of mental illnesses. The key feature of the article is the attitude of the faith community in the program with a 'sense of pride in the work that they did'. the personal interest of the inhabitants to do their duty well by the patients.?

The publication featured many examples of the work that faith communities have undertaken globally. In Den Haag Netherlands an Armenian refugee family sought refuge from deportation in a church. By Dutch law police are forbidden access during worship service so the congregation held continuous praise for half a year until government agreed to accept the family of five. In California a Catholic congregation has provided beds, and clothing plus transportation funds to help refugee families to reach their final destinations.

Canadian examples country-wide help others in need. Congregational members have used land to grow fresh vegetables for food banks. Facilities have been opened to provide shelter for the homeless out in the cold. Many have provided space for organizations seeking meeting rooms regardless of religious faith. In Tottenham the United Church pastoral charge provides 'soup and a bun' on Mondays for any in the community at nominal cost, funds being donated to CLASS (Community Living Association) in Alliston. Subsidized access to professional medical health services is also provided. A church community, working with the Winnipeg Free Press, has helped organize provincial publicity for faith communities working together to promote the efforts of Moslems, Catholics, Anglicans, Mennonites, Presbyterians, Muslims and United Churches,

Christmas only occurs once a year but the season for giving is part of a year round story for the nation's faith communities.