**St. Paul’s Community Workshop Outreach Ministry – Mission Seniors Center Association Presentation**

**February 7, 2019**

St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church is a small congregation of about 80 people, 40-50 gathering on any given Sunday. Our church family is predominantly made up of seniors, with a few younger families. If all the children associated with our congregation came at once we would have about 30 kids. Our building and property are located on Cedar just north of Cherry Ave, across from Albert McMahon elementary school.

I began serving as minister at St. Paul’s 7 years ago. Since moving to Mission and getting to know the people of St. Paul’s I’ve noticed that folks really grow in their relationships with each other and share things about their lives when they are working together. When the men are preparing a pancake breakfast. When the women are cleaning up after a potluck dinner. When all ages come together at a church work party, cleaning, tidying and repairing together. Folks tell stories about their children and their recent health situations, they tell stories about their jobs and families. They share the circumstances of their lives with each other, and because we are church, they aren’t afraid to offer prayer and encouragement to each other.

A few years ago one of our ladies, a relatively recent widow, lamented at a pancake breakfast, “I’ve got all my husband’s tools in the garage … I really don’t know what to do with them …”

A few weeks later, an elder in our church approached me with a newspaper article on the Australian Man Shed movement. She said, “here’s what we could do with Bill’s\* tools.” The article outlined how men were gathering in each other’s garages and yards to BBQ, fix stuff, putter around and share their lives. The Man Shed movement started as a Christian outreach to men who don’t feel at ease in a traditional church setting. It ended up providing men with a place to go and a place to belong and since it was a Christian ministry, a place to ask questions about faith and grow spiritually.

As our elders looked around the congregation, we noticed folks like Cam\*, a retired mechanic who, in his eighties finally gave in and downsized, leaving his shop full of tools behind and moving into an apartment. We saw Graham and Margery\*, sell their small hobby farm and move to town. We saw that seniors in our congregation were grieving the loss of their property, space and tools. We saw that life in a cramped apartment, while easier, was less fulfilling and sometimes isolating because of the move away from their familiar neighbourhood. We wondered if a community workshop might help folks like these get out again and enjoy healthy, social activity again.

When we looked out at our community, we noticed that many people feel isolated, and many have low self-esteem and are in need of productive activities and a chance to do good for themselves and others. We also started to hear more and more in the media about the epidemic of loneliness and how devastating it is for our individual and community health.

Montreal Gazette article:[[1]](#footnote-1)

* Loneliness is a growing public health concern
* Research suggests it carries the same health risks as a 15 cigarette / day habit
* Linked to depression and anxiety
* Experienced across lifespan, but elderly, adolescents and those going through big life transitions are most at risk
* Prevention is best and requires a group effort
* Community centers, churches, not-for-profit organizations, local, provincial and federal government – working together to increase community connection and cohesion
* Quality of relationships is most important

It’s one thing for the city and other organizations to provide green space and farmers markets, events that draw people together … but most important are opportunities for people to grow authentic quality relationships. This fact is supported by scientific studies on mental health in people of all ages – especially adolescents and seniors. One study shows that people experience three peaks in loneliness through out their life time: in their 20’s, 50’s and 80’s. As Christians we believe that God made us to be in relationship with each other and with God. Without those key relationships in tact, we suffer. As a church, we at St. Paul’s believe we are called to love our neighbours and that God is calling us to reach out to help meet the needs of lonely, isolated people who would benefit from working together with their hands in an accepting and encouraging environment. It is our greatest desire to share what God builds through us, unconditionally with our neighbourhood and wider community. While our Community Workshop Outreach Ministry will be explicitly Christian and designed for seekers and people wanting to learn more about a life following Jesus, the other ways we wish to share the workshop will be simply that, inviting others into the space to make things, be together and do good for the people of our city.

We hope the workshop will also be a venue for equipping people with skills for their futures. We’d like to facilitate mentoring relationships between people with skills and experience and young people in need of job skills and self-esteem and a strong encouraging relationship with a caring older person. We’d like to see people living in transition homes or otherwise at risk or vulnerable, also in need of job skills, come out and grow in their employability and confidence, working side by side people who care about their future.

Since reading that article a few years ago and wondering what to do with a garage full of tools, we at St. Paul’s have been tossing around the idea of beginning our own workshop outreach, like the Australian Man Shed movement. We’ve got the land, we know the people we’d like to connect to and provide for, and now we’ve got the courage to make a go of it.

We are here today to share this vision with you and to hear from the Seniors Association about how we can help contribute to the health of seniors in Mission through this project.

On your table are a few handouts you may take with you. A recent article from the Montreal Gazette expressing the opinion of a mental health expert on how important it is that we tackle the epidemic of loneliness proactively, an article outlining the origins of the Australian Man Shed movement, a sketch of what our workshop might look like with a few draft ideas below and a chart of the groups within Mission we hope to share our workshop with.

Are there any questions?

1. Victoria Carmichael, the research manager of the Social Psychiatry Research and Interest Group (SPRING) at the Douglas Mental Health University Institute, montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-more-should-be-done-to-prevent-loneliness

   \*not his/her real name [↑](#footnote-ref-1)