

## **REPORT OF THE BUILDING / HERITAGE COMMITTEE ON REIMAGING OUR BUILDING – DECEMBER 2019**

### **INITIAL CONCERNS SANCTUARY CAPACITY**

In early 2016, ongoing concern was expressed by the Council and Congregation of Ralph Connor Memorial United Church (“RCMUC”) that the capacity of the sanctuary was at or near capacity not only for special services such as Christmas, Easter, weddings, and funerals but also for regular Sunday worship. Of note, there is an accepted metric that when a sanctuary is regularly over 80% of its legal seating capacity it becomes uncomfortable and unwelcoming for both new and current attendees at Sunday worship.

Council and Congregation also expressed concern that the balance of the built space, including offices, upstairs meeting room, storage, kitchen, washrooms, and hall, (collectively referred to in this report as “Gordon Hall”) did not efficiently meet the needs of its users and hampered the mission of the Church. There was support for a reimagining of our built space and to explore renovation and expansion to better meet our mission.

Also of note, RCMUC was designated as a Provincial Heritage Resource in 1983. Alberta Culture is responsible to approve any changes for the sanctuary or building envelope due to the Historical Designation of the Church.

### **COMMISSIONING**

Early in 2016, possibilities for increasing seating capacity in the Sanctuary were considered. A presentation was made to the congregation at the 2016 AGM held in February 2017. Subsequent to this meeting, the Council commissioned the Building/Heritage Committee (“BHC”) of Council to explore options for possible expansion of the Church Sanctuary and renovation and/or expansion of Gordon Hall. The Committee was asked to report to Council and the Congregation for comment and direction as this exploration proceeded.

### **BACKGROUND**

Many ideas were considered for increasing seating capacity, most of which were eliminated - as noted in italics.

The following are some of the other alternatives considered and the reasons for rejecting them noted in italics:

- Squeeze in another row of pews. *Already done. The legroom is already minimal.*
- Change to chairs. *Pews are a historic feature. Further, a change to comfortable chairs would not substantively increase seating. There is a possibility that chairs can be added to existing seating.*
- Add another Sunday service. *This does not promote a community of worship, adds ongoing costs, such as music, etc., and does nothing to mitigate lack of seating for special events.*

- Extend to the south of the Sanctuary. *This would involve demolishing and rebuilding the south wall and adjacent portions of Gordon Hall. This would require both including significant and extensive interior and exterior modifications (heating and plumbing) and would be extremely costly for marginal gain.*
- Add a mezzanine space. *This would involve extensive interior modifications extensive modifications outside the sanctuary, and would significantly change the appearance of the sanctuary and possibly cause significant changes in the acoustics. Because the existing sanctuary is an Alberta Heritage Building approval of such changes would be difficult to obtain. Even if approval was granted, such changes would be difficult and exceptionally costly.*
- Build a new sanctuary on our property. *Very disruptive and very costly to the point that a move off-site might be less cost-prohibitive. Further, because the existing sanctuary is an Alberta Heritage Building it would need to be repurposed – probably as a gathering space.*
- Move to a new location. We are aware that at least one church in Canmore is proceeding with this very option – selling their downtown property and using the proceeds for a new building out of the core. *There is no thirst for abandoning our historic property. Further, the Alberta Heritage designation would probably be a disincentive to potential purchasers.*

In the end, the only viable and possible option was to expand to the Narthex. The reversal of the orientation of the Sanctuary was proposed because this would create a significant 25 - 50% increase in seating for the least possible cost (drawings illustrating this are available), and would allow access to the washrooms from the sanctuary without having to walk past the pulpit.

Several meetings and consultations were held with Alberta Culture to discuss this concept, and with the assistance of Russell and Russell Design Studios, it culminated in a formal proposal in May of 2017 which was subsequently approved by Alberta Culture in September 2017.

The BHC then turned its attention to consideration of the companion spaces (Gordon Hall, the backyard and parking stalls) and how they might serve the missions of RCMUC.

### **PROGRAMMING (aka NEEDS ANALYSIS)**

Early in 2018, with the approval of Council, the architectural firm Transept Architecture (“Transept”) was retained to undertake a Needs Analysis and prepare a Programming Report. Transept Architects was formerly Woods Parker, who were the architects for the 1984 relocation of the sanctuary and construction of Gordon Hall.

Principals of Transept Architects spent time with members of Council, Rev. Wooley, the BHC, the administrative assistant, the music and choir directors, representatives of the property committee, and children's' education ministry. Representatives of Transept and the BHC also spent time meeting and/or communicating with Council and representatives

of each committee of Council and every user group including among others, Evensong, Healing Pathways, CYAN and Friends of CYAN, Bow Valley Syria Refugee Committee, Preschool, the Adult Day Group and Bow Valley Chorus to discuss their specific needs. Rev. Wooley also discussed needs with representatives of the AA user group. Additionally, the Town of Canmore was consulted on parking requirements and requirements and issues which may arise from changes to the building envelope.

In May 2018, Transept summarized its findings in the *Programming and Visioning Report*. This was not a “bricks and mortar report”. The report set forth the broad vision of the Church focusing on the existing ministries of the Church. The report also highlighted the strengths of the Church building in fostering the vision and fulfilling its ministries and discussed what measures could be taken to address some of the challenges of the Church building. This report was presented to the Congregation on Sunday, June 3, 2018.

Subsequently, a Town Hall meeting, chaired by Transept, for all congregants was held on June 12, 2018. Subsequent to this meeting, a final report was prepared and posted for Council and the Congregation.

## **CONCEPT PLANS**

Satisfied with the Programming Report, Council retained Transept Architects to incorporate the Programming Report into Concept Plans. Concept Plans were developed and revised after consultation with the BHC. The Committee accepted a final set of Concept Plans, which were presented to Council and then to the Congregation at the Annual Meeting in January 2019. See <http://ralphconnor.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/RCMUC-Concept-Plan-for-discussion.pdf>

## **ISSUES WITH CONCEPT PLANS**

Congregants expressed concern about the Concept Plans and wanted more discussion and input prior to the congregation committing itself to the next steps. The next steps would involve the development of detailed construction drawings and a construction budget based on a final revised Concept Plan. A further next step would be the development of a fundraising plan by RCMUC to ensure that the construction could proceed in an orderly manner meeting financial commitments as they would arise during construction.

## **COMMUNITY REVIEW AND ENGAGEMENT**

Directed by Council, the BHC sought community review and thorough engagement by the congregation through a series of focus groups and an online survey accessed and publicized in the e-Newsletter and manual distribution through the Church office. The Committee wishes to thank the assistance of Joy McMann in conducting the focus groups and Dale Stanway in the development and compilation of the survey. A brief preliminary report on the survey and community engagement was presented to Council and the congregation in September 2019.

## REPORT ON SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

### a) Focus Groups

Three focus group discussions were held and a total of 23 persons participated. The following seven main themes were expressed. It was very clear that the cost of renovation/expansion is a very considerable concern for the congregation.

It is important that:

1. We consider a disconnect between our vision/mission, the plan as presented and the cost
2. We continue to focus on outreach and community efforts and connections
3. We are a welcoming, inviting and inclusive community
4. We are able to consider alternatives – we need more information, more ideas, lower-cost options that still address our core needs; the current plan seems overboard/too big
5. We do not lose the amazing sound in the sanctuary
6. We do not want to leave a legacy of debt or an insolvent church; we do not want to be the cause of the end of this church
7. We leave a positive legacy

While developing the survey BHC was guided by these concerns, as well as the results of the extensive previous consultation with all user groups done by Transept and ad hoc discussions among congregants. Throughout this report survey results and concerns from the focus group have been considered and highlighted and some specific comments were summarized and paraphrased.

### b) Survey

The survey was widely distributed among the congregation and user groups. 100 responded to the survey. Some people participated in the focus groups as well as responded to the survey.

Given that roughly 120 income tax receipts were issued last year response of 100 is significant. Further, the vast majority classified themselves as active in worship and/or mission work (86%). The remaining were either with user groups or inactive but interested in the work and life of the Church. Given the foregoing, the BHC believes that the results of the survey are a valid reflection of the users of RCMUC property. Of interest, 67% of the respondents were 65 or older. The largest demographic was 65 to 74 years of age (42%), followed by 55 to 64 (26%), and 75 to 90 (25%).

This report is a summary gleaned from the answers to the set questions and the comments to the questions. These comments were very instructive and have been summarized and paraphrased in the narrative. We want to thank all survey participants and everyone who took the time to add these comments.

### c) Sanctuary

The major worry regarding the sanctuary is that potential congregants are turned away – or at least discouraged from making return visits – as they see a full church with no room for new people.

Other identified concerns include:

- Worshipers needing to access washrooms or deal with crying infants during the service need to walk past the pulpit to Gordon Hall or leave the building through the narthex.
- Access to washrooms in Gordon Hall is difficult. Washrooms are not on the same level as the sanctuary.
- The awkward location of the sound system makes it impossible to make real-time sound adjustments during worship.
- The Narthex is unheated and is often too cold for overflow attendees and others (such as brides)
- Visual contact between the Minister and the pianist can be difficult with the current arrangement.
- If additional seating were to be added at the front of the church it would be too cramped for choir, Healing Pathway, weddings, and funerals.

Most survey participants agree (67%) that the seating capacity of the sanctuary is too small. 51% strongly or somewhat support the Concept Plan to increase the seating capacity of the sanctuary. However, it is significant there was more strong opposition (21%) than strong support (16%) for the sanctuary Concept Plan.

Survey respondents considered ways to deal with the seating capacity constraints and traffic flow of the Sanctuary. 49 respondents said they would attend a second service on Sunday morning. 33 urged a high-quality video link into Gordon Hall, 27 expressed willingness to attend a mid-week traditional service. (Some respondents chose more than one of these options.)

A compromise suggestion was made by a survey respondent, of cutting an opening in the back walls of the sanctuary. There would be fabric curtains or folding dividers which could be opened for extra seating in the narthex. As this idea came in via the survey, we do not know how much support this idea would have. We would want to ensure that the fine acoustics of the existing sanctuary would not be compromised.

Focus group participants also expressed concern that as a welcoming, inviting and inclusive community, being too full, particularly in the winter and spring, is not welcoming, and that 10 to 20 more spaces are needed in the sanctuary. On the other hand, some commented that they do not believe there is an issue with respect to the seating capacity of the sanctuary, that the present situation is “snug” but not “crowded”. Caution was also expressed that we need to consider if there will be a need

for more space in the sanctuary in the future given the demographics of the current congregation and that increasingly our mission is not about “bums in pews”.

With respect to changes to the sanctuary, acoustics and not losing the feel of the worship space were major concerns. There is a significant fear that an unintended consequence of reversing the orientation of the sanctuary could be a loss of the “...amazing sound in the sanctuary... a very significant loss to our singing congregation”. There was also a strong desire to keep the choir in the pews during worship and not separated in a choir loft. Further, there was the additional concern that the front door entrance from the street has historical significance and is welcoming to all including drop-ins and tourists.

Support was expressed for “...an easily accessible transfer from the sanctuary to Gordon Hall and seamless physical and electronic transfer for overflow”.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

In order to avoid a “Brexit Like” situation, it seems that the congregation would be wise to support only those changes to the sanctuary that attracts more than 66% of support by survey respondents. The current Concept Plan does not appear to have this support and, as mentioned above, has more strong opponents than strong supporters.

The way forward may be to proceed with a high-quality video link for larger worship services and for those with accessibility issues. This would require improvements to Gordon Hall that would provide a comfortable space/spaces for worship and reflection as well as being suitable for outreach, fellowship activities such as coffee after service, and community connections. Traffic flow and washroom access from the sanctuary need to be addressed. Time should be spent on considering making the existing sanctuary more accessible to persons with disabilities so that they are not just relegated to Gordon Hall.

### **d) Gordon Hall**

#### **i) Reaction to Concept Plan**

More than three times as many of the 81 survey respondents who answered the question regarding the Concept Plan for Gordon Hall supported the plan compared to those who opposed it. 61 were in favor of expanding Gordon Hall compared to 20 who opposed expansion. When comparing those who felt strongly one way or another, the ratio is even higher. 28 strongly supported the Concept Plan while only 8 strongly opposed it. This means that there were 3.5 times as many strong supporter than strongly opposed.

The top 5 reasons favoring expansion/renovation were:

- small space limits our community outreach
- awkward, small, not functional common space
- kitchen inefficient if more than two working in it
- main floor space is generally cramped, and
- inefficient split-office layout between minister and administration

at present.

There was a solid agreement of the benefits of an enlarged and renovated Gordon Hall as indicated in the Concept Plan.

- 73% - better washroom facilities
- 69% - room for people with disabilities/mobility aids
- 64% - kitchen would work better
- 63% - greater comfort/space for luncheons
- 58% - improved minister/secretary access

The way forward may be to proceed with improvements to Gordon Hall that would address acceptable washroom facilities, room and access for persons with disabilities, traffic flow, an efficient and adequate kitchen, comfort for luncheons and coffee, efficient office space and the potential to use Gordon Hall with a high quality video link for larger worship services. Time should be spent considering making the existing sanctuary more accessible to persons with disabilities so that they are not just relegated to Gordon Hall.

#### ii) **Urgent Renovations – Gordon Hall**

80 Respondents answered the question about “what urgent renovations will need to be done even if we do not proceed with the Concept Plan. 81% said “wheelchair accessibility and 71% said “improved washroom facilities”. Another 65% chose “improved kitchen facility. In the comments section, respondents urged expansion and reorganizing the inefficient and inconvenient layout of offices, and small meeting spaces.

The focus groups expressed similar concerns.

Other additional urgent concerns include:

Comfortable overflow space from the worship service with adequate audiovisual streaming.

Serious lack of adequate storage space for the use of user groups. No secure areas.

Sound transmission between areas-(offices/kitchen/hall/upstairs/sanctuary) is disruptive to activities.

Plumbing fixtures need replacing.

Main double door leaks.

Narthex door is draughty and narthex is cold.

Kitchen appliances are inadequate, inefficient and are in need of replacement.

#### iii) **Concerns about Renovation / Expansion program**

There is a consensus that our existing building is constraining our existing programming and missions and may be hampering the growth of these programs and missions. So, what is holding us back from the expansion and renovation of our building?

There is a deep concern about financing such a project. Of the 76 Respondents, 83% were concerned about “how we will pay for the expansion”. Two other concerns also hit the

50% mark: there is a general trend away from mainline church attendance in younger generations” (54%) and “we may not have a guarantee of future income from current or future users of our meeting rooms” (50%) Our user groups and mission groups are not wealthy. We cannot rely on these groups to fill the gap in any decrease in givings from a smaller and older congregation. There is a concern that the congregation will have to focus on fundraising and property/rental management detracting from our mission work.

On the positive side, 44 respondents, 59% of the 76 respondents did feel that “The United Church of Canada has a very progressive approach to social issues and so do many groups in the Bow Valley which need meeting space.” No other positive notes “hit a 50% threshold.

The top five concerns specific to the plans for Gordon Hall were concerns with costs:

- building and maintaining it (6 responses),
- this congregation is always in/near financial trouble (5 responses),
- do not want debt payment to become the main purpose of RCMUC (5 responses),
- more weddings/receptions isn’t a good reason to do this and wouldn’t raise much money (5 responses), and,
- would rather spend dollars on program and outreach efforts than on facility (4 responses).

#### **iv) Concerns about No Renovation / Expansion program**

On the other hand there are concerns that the existing building is hampering our growth as a congregation because it appears full, cluttered, disorganized, awkward and unwelcoming. The existing building does not suit the needs of user groups; thereby, we may be missing opportunities for mission and revenue.

Further, Gordon Hall was built 35 years ago and its age is showing. There is an ongoing need for repairs and maintenance. Additionally, appliances are failing or are no longer inadequate. We owe a debt to the Property Committee who have kept us functioning but we are nearing the breaking point when “band-aids” will no longer work.

Sample responses to the survey and the focus groups that articulate these issues with the existing building.

- “Doing nothing is not an option - some things need to be addressed.”
- “If we do not build we will die. All but a very small proportion of our current congregation are new since our last renovation in 1984 and were attracted to the “little white church on Main Street”. I strongly believe that the former tired, little mustard coloured church with inadequate facilities (small church hall, no office space, etc.) would have had much less appeal.”
- “We see the 1984 building upgrades as a legacy that we have enjoyed and are enjoying - what might people say 25-30 years

ahead about what we do now?"

v) **Funding any Renovation / Expansion program**

If a project is undertaken, "soliciting pledges for the funds" was either the first or second choice of 69% of Respondents. The clear second choice was "partial financing with the Ralph Connor Trustee funds" at 58%.

When asked, "If we chose to not proceed with the development of the full Concept Plan, what should be budgeted for necessary renovations?" 49 Respondents out of 65 who responded to this question were in support of a figure of \$100,000.00 or higher. 32 respondents indicated \$100,000, 6 respondents indicated \$200,000, and 11 respondents indicated \$250,000.

**WAY FORWARD**

Given the concern about the capacity of the congregation to finance construction and maintenance of the existing Concept Plan, the BHC recommends the congregation at the Annual Meeting in January 2020 authorize Council to strike an Implementation Sub Committee of the BHC to modify the Concept Plan and maintain the existing footprint with a consolidation of the offices, a relocation of the administrative offices and workspace, a relocation and reimagining of the kitchen and renovation of the washrooms. Further, this Implementation Subcommittee would be directed to prepare a preliminary budget to implement the modified plan. The modifications would be guided by the following minimum objectives and criteria, which the BHC has distilled from the findings of this Report and urgent needs identified by committees and user groups.

1. No renovations to the sanctuary or its access from the street or from Gordon Hall with the possible exception of a wider doorway from Gordon Hall to accommodate wheelchairs
2. No expansion of Gordon Hall;
3. Priority be given to making the common space attractive to overflow from the sanctuary with a high-quality built-in speaker system and video link to stream service and/or PowerPoint onto a large TV (55" or greater) and secondarily as a meeting and gathering space;
4. Focus on accessibility to include a wheelchair accessible washroom
5. Lift/elevator or means for easy access from Gordon Hall to the sanctuary.
6. Making the stairs and landing between door leading into the sanctuary from Gordon Hall more accessible with better handrails and width of stairs
7. Two non-gendered washrooms in addition to wheelchair accessible washroom
8. Office space with separate offices for the minister and admin assistant, work area with a computer for committee and user groups and small meeting room, and separate copy room
9. Storage rooms with dedicated storage areas for committee and user groups such as Evensong, Choir (two file cabinets and a keyboard), Banners, Prayer Shawl supplies, Children's Education, Worship (supplies and decoration), Maintenance

supplies, table and chair storage, kitchen storage, etc.

10. Allow one storage room to be converted into the elevator in the future for accessibility to the second floor for persons and supplies.
11. Sufficient private and discreet space which can be used for AA meetings, etc.
12. Reconsideration of the kitchen layout and purchase of adequate appliances.
13. Resolution of urgent maintenance issues such as bathroom fixtures and appliance replacement and heating issues.

If funds are or become available to the congregation, the Committee recommends these additional projects:

14. Sink with hot and cold water on the second floor
15. Storage room on the second floor
16. Elevator to the second floor, this also provides a second exit to the upstairs space.
17. The existing sanctuary could be made more accessible to persons with disabilities so that they are not just relegated to Gordon Hall.

### **Further recommendations**

We further recommend that the Council set up a Fundraising Committee with an immediate goal of \$100,000.00 and to negotiate with the Trustees to access funds through transfer and loan to meet an anticipated budget of \$200,000.00.

### **Options for the Implementation Committee**

If the congregation accepts the recommendation of the BHC at its Annual Meeting, the Implementation Committee should consider among other options the following:

#### **1. Do Nothing other than respond to maintenance issues.**

Concerns with this approach have been articulated throughout this report.

#### **2. No expansion or renovations in the Sanctuary. Renovations but no expansion of Gordon Hall.**

Renovation of Gordon Hall would include a high-quality video link to the Sanctuary for larger worship services and for those with accessibility issues. This would require improvements to Gordon Hall that would provide a comfortable space to worship and reflect. The worship space or other space must also be suitable for fellowship activities such as coffee after worship services, and pastoral care, outreach and community connections, some of which would require discrete access and private meeting area. Renovations would also be done to ensure easy and accessible access from the sanctuary, accessible (1) and non-gender (2) washrooms, creation of a reconfigured and efficient kitchen area, reconfiguration of office space, creation of adequate storage rooms and storage areas, and convenient and efficient traffic flow throughout.)

This option results in a significant reduction in common space in Gordon Hall. Although it is imaged at this time that there will be room for overflow from the sanctuary for special events and space for coffee service after worship or special events in the sanctuary, given the other needs there would NOT be room for sit down meal service, for many activities by existing and potential user or mission groups, or for large meetings or training sessions.

Accordingly, as a significant space saver, the kitchen could be reimagined for reduced options for hospitality, i.e. coffee service only. This would mean that we would need to rent or use facilities elsewhere in Canmore for congregation dinners, teas, luncheons, etc. as we have in the past for Family Christmas services, wedding and funeral receptions, and for larger conferences/meetings. At present, very few receptions after weddings and funerals are held in RCMUC, and this number would drop to zero with so little hosting space available.

We must be satisfied that our existing or potential outreach activities would be able to be accommodated in other facilities in busy and expensive Canmore and that we budget for any costs with this outsourcing of banquet/conference space. (Note: This is a variation of the discussion many of us are having. Do we downsize to a one-bedroom and rent hotel rooms when we have family visitors or guests or do we pay the additional purchase, maintenance and operational costs of a unit with more bedrooms?)

For discussion purposes: see <http://ralphconnor.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Preliminary-Bldg-Plans-Opt1-Opt2.pdf>

### **3. Renovate Gordon Hall as above but have rented commercial space offsite for offices and storage to create more kitchen, meeting, and gathering space**

If the congregation CANNOT envisage loss of common space for sit down meals and conferences, there is the option of outsourcing space for office and/or storage. Storage that is seasonal could be relocated to a heated storage unit. The offices and meeting rooms could be relocated into commercial office space elsewhere in downtown Canmore. We could even consider storefront offices in the vicinity of the Church. The upside with this option is that the congregation would not have to fund an extension of Gordon Hall and could spread the cost of additional space over time through rental. However, the congregation would be hostage to the vagaries of a commercial rental market.

### **4. Renovate Gordon Hall as above but move offices to the second floor**

After the building program in 1984/85, the offices were located on the second floor. This was abandoned as the offices were so isolated and it was disconcerting as unknown visitors nosily climbed the steps. However, with modern video/intercom systems installed at the doors, visitors could announce their presence (and be seen) and be given access to the second floor. For visitors with mobility issues, the existing main floor

Minster's office could be used as a conference room with the Minister and staff leaving the second-floor offices and joining the visitor on the main level.

This option has real potential. For discussion, the BHC has created informal drawings of potential floorplans to illustrate this. The consolidation of office space and some storage space on the second floor opens more public useable space on the main floor which has same level washroom access. This would be particularly good for Children's education. Further, the existing Minister's main floor office, if expanded, could be used for discrete private space (with a separate door) for things like AA meetings or for that matter pastoral meetings with individuals who wished discretion. If properly configured it might be useable for Healing Touch or Evensong.

The drawback is that this second floor configuration would not be accessible to individuals with mobility issues unless an elevator was possible and washrooms and access to water and kitchenette may have to be on the main level. Further, the need to use the intercom system would be a discouragement to drop-in visitors.

For discussion purposes: see <http://ralphconnor.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Preliminary-Bldg-Plans-Opt1-Opt2.pdf>

### **Lots to think about!**

All of which is respectfully submitted by the RCMUC Building/Heritage Committee working group. Thanks is also given to Mary Cranston and John Thorburn for their earlier service on this committee.

Respectfully submitted: The Building and Heritage Committee  
Members: Paul Elfner, Chair, and Ian Schofield, Dale Stanway, Karen Fraser, Rev. Greg Wooley  
Advisor to the Committee: Joy McMann