

St. Mark's Presbyterian Church



Elder Stories

Elders of St. Mark's reflect on their experiences and share the joy of giving back to the congregation through their journeys as elders

The Kirk Session of
St. Mark's Presbyterian Church
thanks the following individuals
for their contribution of
talent and time to this project:

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Foreword

SAINTS OF GOD

Even though the word *saint* is biblical, the popular understanding and use of the word is quite different than what the bible has in mind. While in popular usage a saint is usually a hero of moral virtue and sanctity, the bible understands saints to be the ordinary people of God whom God uses to serve divine purposes. The true saint is a person who would never think of himself or herself as a saint, but simply as a person who is thankful for an opportunity to serve God's glory in some way.

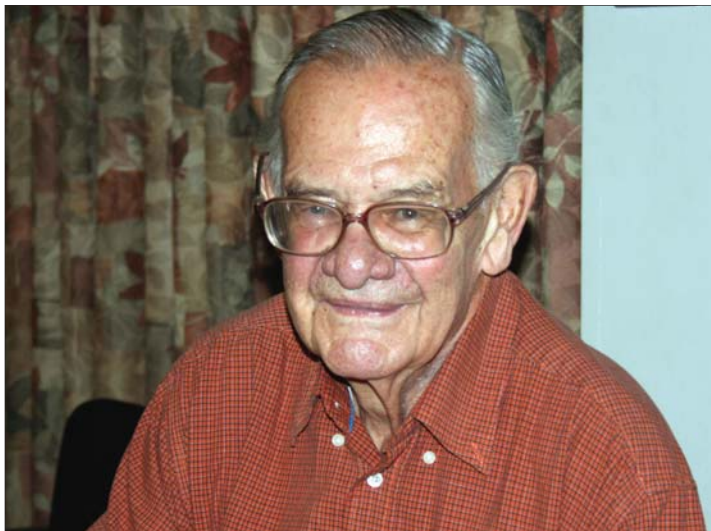
This also fits well with our Presbyterian Tradition, where modesty and humility are held up as the highest virtues next to love. A person who thinks of himself or herself too highly or is idolized that way, is a person who is robbing God of glory. A genuine saint is a servant, and a genuine servant is one who is always surprised to be recognized for their service when they are simply doing what seems to come naturally. We are all imperfect and flawed human beings. A true servant knows this better than others. To serve God's glory, then, is always a surprise, even when it seems so natural.

It is this kind of virtue that we behold in the pages that follow. The men and women who have served St. Mark's as long-time elders are genuine saints of the Presbyterian and biblical variety. Writing about them is not an exercise in the glorification of particular human beings but an act of bearing witness to the glory of God through humble service. God can achieve what we cannot imagine possible.

Such an act of bearing witness, moreover, is not intended to remain focused on the individuals written about. Rather, this exercise is intended to inspire and encourage us all in our own commitments and discernment before God as to our own calling to serve in the particularity of who we are.

May you be blessed and inspired in your reading, and may you and I give thanks that God continues to grow true saints among us.

Rev. Dr. Harris Athanasiadis
Minister at St. Mark's Presbyterian Church



Don Hazell

Don and Shirley Hazell wondered why they were still attending a midtown Toronto church when they knew the minister at a new church in their own neighbourhood: St. Mark's in the suburb of Don Mills. "I had known Don Collier from school, and I liked him," says Don. "We were so welcomed at St. Mark's."

He recalls that on just the second Sunday he attended a service, he was asked to participate in a canvass of the neighbourhood to find out which churches the residents preferred and to be captain of one of the teams going door to door. "I was hooked and reeled in pretty quickly," he says, laughing.

Don became an elder in 1958. "I think it's important to make contact with your communicants, and that doesn't have to be a home visit. It can be more informal, such as over coffee at church or with a phone call," he says. "People like to know there is someone, in addition to the minister, they can talk to."

In the early 1960s, Don also became the Sunday school superintendent in charge of senior students. This was a busy time for the congregation: two worship services on Sundays and nearly 500 children enrolled in the Sunday school. Don, a high school principal, was a good manager and ideal for the job.

Don was Clerk of Session for 20 years, until 2007. “In my mind, the Clerk has two roles,” he says. “The first is managerial – correspondence, taking minutes, keeping records of baptisms and people inducted to Session and that sort of thing. The second is even more important, and that is to assist the minister in dealing with problems.”

Don says he felt the various ministers over the years trusted him. “And that started with our first minister. He was good at delegating, and that has continued. All our ministers have recognized people who could do a job and then let them go to it.”

John Congram, a former minister at St. Mark’s, says Don was a person to go to if you had a concern. “Don can bring a solution to a problem; he can find reconciliation and community agreement.”

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Harris Athanasiadis, the current minister, agrees. “He is intelligent; he has an authority that is given, and that inspires confidence,” says Harris.

These qualities were valuable to the committees on which Don has served. A key relationship involves the Korean congregation that shares the sanctuary at St. Mark’s for its Sunday services and

other rooms for its programs throughout the week. Don was frequently the contact person for the two congregations, when it came to scheduling time and locations for each group to hold its activities.

In the late 1990s, St. Mark’s went through a difficult few years when one minister resigned, followed by several short-term pulpit appointments before the current minister was called. Without a full-time minister, Don, as Clerk, was considered a point of stability.

“Don is perhaps the most faithful church leader I have met,” says Terry Hastings, a former minister at the church. “He is very genuine, always ready to listen – a man who truly does live his faith. I greatly appreciate his ministry to me; he was a good mentor and shepherd.”

Don, now 81, intends to continue as an elder; it is something he enjoys. “At St. Mark’s, being an elder is not an appointment as recognition for years of service; an elder at this church should expect to serve on at least one committee,” he says. “You should be prepared to commit yourself and share whatever gifts you have.” ♦



Dalice Livingston

Dalice and Hamish Livingston immigrated to Canada from England with their two children in 1957, and they soon joined St. Mark's, a church near their suburban Toronto home and on the recommendation of their doctor. "He said there were lots of kids there; and there were – about 400," says Dalice.

In those early days, the couple thought there should be a time for socializing after the Sunday service, so they organized the coffee hour, which is still a mainstay of congregational life at St. Mark's.

Dalice also ran the Christmas pageant as well as a dance program for the children. The couple had been professional dancers and even appeared before for the Queen at a Royal Command Performance. Hamish, who passed away in 1981, was a CBC television producer. He also made documentary films, including some about Don Collier, the first minister at St. Mark's. Collier left the congregation to run a rehabilitation facility.

Dalice and Hamish later organized and ran a program to visit patients in a Toronto cancer hospital. "I always had an interest in palliative care, and this was very rewarding," says Dalice.

In 1972, Dalice and Hamish were the first married couple to be ordained as elders in Canada.

“To become elders was a very big deal for us; it meant a real commitment,” says Dalice.

In 1980, the Livingstons introduced the congregation to the Cursillo movement. A significant characteristic of the movement is the weekend workshops at which lay people are encouraged to renew their Christian faith. The aim of Cursillo is to build community, raise awareness of leadership potential and, as Dalice says, “imagine the church how you would like it to be.”

Cursillo, which began in the Roman Catholic church in Spain in the 1940s, is an international movement that has spread in Canada to Alberta and the Maritimes. “This would be our real legacy,” says Dalice, now 80.

Bill McGowan, current Clerk of Session at St. Mark’s, attended the congregation’s first Cursillo weekend.

“If you went on a retreat, you discussed spiritual aspects of life; how you dealt with being a husband, as a couple and with the church,” says Bill. “For me, the impact was profound. Most people who went became more active in the church but perhaps not in the way that

they had been; they may have recognized different skills.”

“To become elders was a very big deal for us; it meant a real commitment.”

Followup sessions, which are called Ultreya and are for people who have attended a Cursillo retreat, continue to take place at St. Mark’s.

Being involved with Cursillo also widened Dalice’s circle of friends. John Kaunds, a past member of St. Mark’s, met Dalice through Cursillo, and they continue to be great friends.

“Dalice was ‘best man’ at my wedding,” he says. “She is and always was a great friend and mentor. Her home is a refuge to many who seek her advice and companionship,” says John.

“She is a great listener and very spiritual in her responses, without being judgmental. Dalice has an amazing capacity to feel and understand people’s pain, joy and predicaments; she always finds the time to share her home and life with others.”

John Congram, a former minister at St. Mark’s agrees. “Dalice is the one who takes the time to visit people who are sick. Building community is important to Dalice, and she works hard at it.” ♦



Ian Mackenzie

Ian Mackenzie, now an elder emeritus at St. Mark's, has had a long career volunteering in several roles. From 1979 until he retired in 2008, Ian represented St. Mark's at the Presbytery of Toronto.

Terry Hastings, a former minister at St. Mark's, recalls that Ian was a great servant of the church. "He really worked hard for the church – not just St. Mark's, but the church as a whole."

Don Hazell, a long-time Clerk of Session at the congregation, says Ian was a valuable resource at Presbytery. "He was extremely committed and would never miss a meeting. Ian became very knowledgeable about church protocol," says Don.

"In something related to the wider church, he gave good advice and was a good negotiator, for instance, when the congregation sold a manse. He also knew the intricacies of the church court, which, as a lawyer, probably interested him. Ian felt strongly about his role at Presbytery; it was a major thrust of his life."

Ian took part in many discussions about church policy over the years and recalls one issue in particular. The Presbyterian Church ordained its first women elders in 1968 amid much resistance.

"In 1983, I happened to be on a committee where it was decided 'the church has spoken,' " says Ian, and the role of women was settled.

Current minister Harris Athanasiadis says Ian's words gave credibility and weight to an idea. "Ian, the second-longest serving representative at Presbytery, was always someone to support new ventures," he says. "He has a sense of faithfulness and tradition in the best sense – he's not stuck in old ways."

Ian and his wife, Helen, joined St. Mark's in 1962. In 1974, Ian became an elder, and for 15 years was also the congregation's treasurer (this, despite penmanship that was famously indecipherable). He also played a part in the day-care the church runs.

In the late 1970s, St. Mark's rented space to a privately run day care, but the congregation chose not to renew the lease, says John Congram, the minister at that time. "Not everyone in the congregation believed the church should take on the running of a day care," he adds. "Ian was keen to do it, and he joined the board." The private business closed in August, and the church's day care opened in September, with no break in service.

Ian sat on the board of directors when the day care opened in 1981 and continued until he retired in 2007. Over the years, he was the day-care board president, vice-president and a signing officer.

Iren Telemi, supervisor of the day care, has only praise for Ian's role. "In 2001, we celebrated the day care's 20th anniversary, and Ian's 20 years of volunteer work was acknowledged by MPP David Caplan, who was present at the ceremony," she says.

"Ian was always available whenever I needed him, anything I needed to know about the day care, all I had to do was ask him – he knew all the details from memory. He made a great contribution in sorting out our grants and always had the best knowledge of our financial matters.

"He still comes by sometimes for a visit, and we chat about the day care," adds Iren.

Ian, now 93, plays down his own contributions and prefers to stress what he has received rather than what he has given to the church. He says the best thing about St. Mark's is its pastoral care. "I remember having to go to the hospital for two days – it was nothing serious and nobody knew – but (former minister) Harrold Morris found out and visited." Such a modest attitude is typical of Ian.

"Ian seems to be a contented man," says Harris Athanasiadis. "His kind is irreplaceable." ♦



Ian Michie

Ian Michie, now an elder emeritus at St. Mark's, played a crucial part in a remarkable story of Christian care.

The story began in 1979, with pictures in the daily media of people fleeing Vietnam in boats. "I was interested; I was a sailor during the Second World War," says Ian. "I saw the video shown to our congregation of a boat arriving in Hong Kong. People were on the outside, hanging on to the gunwales. This rang a bell with me."

Others at the church felt the same humanitarian concern, and soon a committee was struck and funds were raised to support Loan Truong and Men Huynh and their two children.

When the family eventually arrived from Hong Kong, Ian and a translator were at the airport to meet them and take the family to their new home, which the church had prepared. "I think of Ian Michie as my adoptive father; he is a kind-hearted person," says Loan. "Some parents never do as much for their own children as Father and Mother Michie did for us."

Refugees from Vietnam ended up scattered across many countries, and within a few months of arriving in Canada, the young couple needed help in making contact with other members of their families. Ian stepped in to help.

“Ian and Molly went to Italy and were instrumental in bringing the family to Canada,” says John Congram, minister of St. Mark’s at the time. Enquiries were made and documents filled out. Eventually, nine members of Loan and Men’s extended families immigrated to Toronto.

The families’ long and close relationship with the Michies continues to this day. “When we joined them last Christmas, there were 38 at the party,” says Molly.

“Ian has contributed care to people that no one knows about,” says John. “He is a tremendously feeling person. If he hears of anyone in difficulty, he wants to help.”

Ian, now 85, is modest about his contribution: “I didn’t do anything alone; I just happened to be in a position to help.”

Ian and Molly and their family moved to Canada from England in 1957. At first, they stayed in a Toronto hotel just a short walk from Glenview Presbyterian Church, which they attended a few times.

“It was a discipline with me to go see my communicants.”

Soon, however, they settled in Don Mills and joined St. Mark’s. “Molly had a cousin here, so we thought we might as well be close to the only person we knew in Canada,” says Ian.

In the early days, Ian, an actuary, was a meticulous church treasurer, Sunday school teacher and a dedicated visiting elder.

“I tried to phone before a visit, not just drop in, and then keep the minister informed of what I learned, perhaps of an illness,” says Ian. “It was a discipline with me to go to see my communicants, usually about 10 families.”

He was involved in other outreach programs as well, including getting approvals to build a four-storey apartment building on the St. Mark’s property. Today, St. Mark’s Court offers 24-hour care to adults living with disabilities, a project that at the time was strongly opposed in the neighbourhood.

The current minister of St. Mark’s, Harris Athanasiadis, says Ian is generous but also self-effacing and respectful of others in his opinions and actions.

“Perhaps it is his war experiences, but he can talk about the value of community, and he has a real sense of gratitude,” says Harris. “His wisdom is something rare.” ❖



Ron Ray

If there is one person who knows everyone at St. Mark's, it is Ron Ray, and it is no accident that he holds that distinction.

"I think I have met or known everybody who has come to St. Mark's, and it has been a real privilege," he says. "I make a point of looking for newcomers and welcoming them. Some places you go, there is no welcome, and that shouldn't happen."

Terry Hastings, a past minister at St. Mark's, says Ron is warm and welcoming to many people. "Ron is a dedicated man who welcomed me and my family not just to the church but to the neighbourhood as well – we lived about five doors down from him. He was a good guide in my early days," says Terry.

Ron says one of the best things about St. Mark's is its friendliness. "This church is thoughtful of others," he says. "It is a welcoming congregation, and it's active and has outreach programs. People can be involved, if they want to be. If something comes up, they can join."

Ron and his wife, Catherine, arrived in Don Mills from Windsor, Ont., and joined the fledgling St. Mark's congregation in 1955.

Ron, who is still an elder, eventually became the longest-serving Clerk of Session at the church – in the post more than 26 years until he resigned in 1988.

“It was the second-best job I ever had,” says Ron, adding that the best job he ever had was being in business for himself. He remains on the church’s board of management.

Catherine has been equally committed to outreach. She serves tea and home baking to seniors at Thompson House, a nearby seniors’ residence. “Our group has been going twice a month for more than 40 years,” she says.

Ron is especially pleased about St. Mark’s Court, the apartment building the congregation built on the church site in 1990 to provide independent housing for adults living with disabilities. He still sits on the housing board.

John Congram, a past minister at the church, says Ron is the sort of person who makes such projects run smoothly. “He is an

“This church is thoughtful of others. It is a welcoming congregation... People can be involved, if they want.”

optimistic guy, who is positive and supportive. He has the ability to meet and talk to people to get things done.”

There have also been a few light moments over the years.

Ron tells the story of one long-ago Sunday when he and Don Collier, the congregation’s first minister, were closing up the doors after a service, and Ron happened to look in the nursery.

“There was a baby, and not a parent in sight,” recalls Ron.

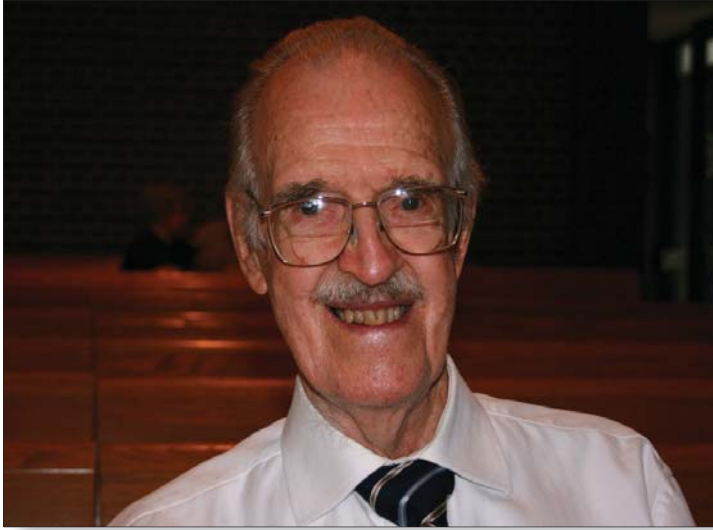
It had been a christening service, and with two cars and two busy parents, somebody apparently forgot to collect the star of the event. “Someone roared up to the church pretty quickly, though.”

Harris Athanasiadis, the current minister at St. Mark’s, describes Ron as an “extrovert of extroverts.”

“He is very committed to people and he is someone people can open up to; he is sensitive and shepherds people,” says Harris.

At 79, Ron remains busy learning and helping. He attends Bible studies, works with Kiwanis and, one morning a week, helps youngsters at a local primary school with their reading

“He gives the impression that every day is a day of discovery,” says Harris. “That quality is rare to find.” ♦



Bill Woolford

The story of St. Mark's could not be written without Bill Woolford, now an elder emeritus at the congregation. The founding elders of the congregation were elected in 1956, and Bill was among them.

"The most important job of an elder is to visit his communicants – be a friend to them – and report back to the minister," says Bill. "Learning to serve the elements can come later."

He adds that the elder is the most important person in the congregation because that individual is in contact with the people, and the role that elders fulfill strengthens the church.

"Bill was exceedingly kind and caring to the people he served as elder," says Terry Hastings, a former minister at St. Mark's. "I recall him going across Toronto just to pay a pastoral call."

The Woolfords were living at Centre Island, a bucolic setting near downtown Toronto, on the infamous October night in 1955 when Hurricane Hazel struck. "The next morning the harbour was full of furniture," recalls Bill. "I think I was the only one to make it to work the next day – lots of roads were blocked – but I took a ferry." The family moved to their home in the new suburb a few months later.

Other young families were gravitating to Don Mills, and Bill was chosen to do a census to find out which residents were interested

in joining the various churches. He organized 10 teams to do the canvassing. “I was in sales, so talking to people was easy for me,” says Bill.

He was also a Clerk of Session and remained in the role until 1961, when he became the Sunday school’s general superintendent. Those were heady days of growth for St. Mark’s, with two packed Sunday services. There were about 500 children enrolled in the church school, and on one early commissioning Sunday, more than 80 teachers and helpers came forward.

“I always enjoyed the Sunday school and always felt it had the complete support of the church. I was pleased with the numbers of children we attracted,” says Bill. “And we weren’t just keeping them busy; we had a program. I most enjoyed the kids about 13 or 14 years old – when they got to the age of asking questions.”

Bill and his late first wife, Mary, were the first at St. Mark’s to serve communion to teenagers who were not yet confirmed. The youngsters wanted the service, and the congregation found it a moving experience, says Bill, adding that Mary was “a great encourager.”

His second wife, Margaret, continues to take part in congregational life at St. Mark’s.

There were many outreach projects, boards and committees as the church grew over the years. John Congram, a former minister at the church, says when Bill took on a project, he was enthusiastic. “He did a great job, whatever it was; he was supportive and always positive.”

In later years, Bill once again worked to help young people, having noticed that families needed child care in the summer when school was out. He became a driving force behind the Footprints Summer Day Camp, which opened in 2000 and continues to flourish.

The current minister, Harris Athanasiadis, calls Bill the moral compass of the congregation.

“When he sees a need – someone who needs help – he doesn’t want to wait for a committee report or further study. He wants to do something about it right now. He is invariably in the moment.

“Bill has been an active person, and he believes a church should be active; he wants to make a difference in the world,” adds Harris.

Bill, now 92, says: “I can’t visualize a community of any size that doesn’t have a church, and it has to keep reaching out. If it’s not active during the week, there’s not much point in going on Sunday.” ♦