

Farewell to Highland Road 'family'

By Liz Monteiro, Record staff

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KITCHENER — Among her long list of last-minute things to do before Sunday, Rev. Katharine Edmonstone mustn't forget the Kleenex boxes.

"I'm going to put them throughout the sanctuary," she said. "I think this Sunday will be very, very emotional."

Many tears will be shed as about 40 members of Highland Road United Church gather one last time at Trinity United Church in downtown Kitchener for their final service.

The official ceremony is called a "disbanding" service, a "de-covenanting" between Highland Road United and the Waterloo Presbytery, which oversees the local United Church congregations. About 500 people are expected, with people from six other United Church congregations joining the service.

But for Highland Road United members, it's the end of a decades-long tradition where some of them have been married, baptized their children and held funeral masses for their spouses. At Highland Road United, the loyalty to God was strong but so was the community of friends who sat in the pews week after week.

Robin Maxwell-Nunn was introduced to Highland Road United through a friend after having her third child. She recalls joining others at coffee time. "Everyone was so friendly," she said.

Maxwell-Nunn said she will miss the people of Highland Road United. Last week, at Sunday service, tears rolled down her cheeks shortly after she sat down, and she continued crying until the second hymn.

"It just all of a sudden hit me. The reality hit me," she said. "It was emotional realizing this is it."

And she wasn't alone. Elaine Struthers had tissues in her purse for herself and others.

"Last week's service was ours. It was intimate," she said.

But Sunday's final service will be more ceremonial with the chair of the presbytery leading the service.

"It will be a celebration of what we have done. We will go out with a bang and not a whimper," Struthers said. "We fought a good fight."

Highland Road United began in 1925 as Knox United. By 1949, the congregation had its own church building on Highland Road. Membership was growing and plans were set to make the sanctuary bigger.

By the mid 1990s, the congregation was dwindling and there was talk of closing the church, but a generous donation from a member gave the church a 14-year reprieve.

In 2007, the congregation voted to sell the building and move as a group to rented space at the Trinity chapel where services began a year later. Amalgamation talks with other United churches in Kitchener were held but no agreement was reached.

The Highland Road congregation voted to disband on Oct. 2, 2011.

The church building was sold to the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada in September 2009.



kwr092811 Parishoners.JPG. Highland Road United Church member Ronald Kreuter, left, joins minister Katharine Edmonstone, and fellow-parishioners Robin Maxwell-Nunn, Elaine Kreuter, and Elaine Struthers in rented space at Trinity United Church on Frederick Street in Kitchener. Highland Road United will hold a final service Sunday before it disbands due to declining membership. Record staff Source: Record staff

After costs, the congregation was left with \$800,000 and donated the money to 18 charities, including \$180,000 to Habitat for Humanity to build three houses. Other donations included \$20,000 to the Mennonite Central Committee, \$20,000 for MCC work in the Philippines, \$20,000 for Waterloo-based Caring Partners International, \$10,000 for the Food Bank of Waterloo Region, \$20,000 for tsunami relief in Japan, \$1,000 for United Churches in Kitchener and \$5,000 for a local family whose home was gutted in a fire.

Church closings are becoming more common, especially among mainstream denominations. It's no longer surprising when churches sell their buildings and close their doors.

Edmonstone said the "good-old days" when families had six kids and sanctuaries were at capacity with 400 people in the pews aren't going to return.

With businesses open, teens working, and children participating in extracurriculars on Sunday, there is little time left for church, said Edmonstone, who was a minister at Highland Road for 13 years. After Sunday's service, she retires.

Maxwell-Nunn returned to church as an adult with fond memories she had of a United Church family during her high school years.

Struthers said she, too, came back to church when her husband, Dick, died of leukemia and she was left to raise two teenagers.

"I needed to be in church. I couldn't do it on my own," she said. "I needed to find a connection to God, to find strength to go on."

"And I'm still here," said the 64-year-old Kitchener woman, who's decided to join the congregation at Trinity United.

Marg Kreuter has been a member of Highland Road United since she was a teenager. She was 18 when she came to Kitchener, leaving her family home in the Prairies.

"Walking into Highland Road was like walking into a family," said Kreuter, who married Ron in the church and baptized her children there.

Last year, the couple celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary and the congregation threw a surprise party for the pair.

It's that community that many will miss.

"There will be sadness and there has been for quite some time, but we will go out with a bang," said Edmonstone. "It will be a grand service."

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