



Media Release



Next Chapter for Stratford’s Knox Church

Stratford, Ontario, October 1, 2020 – The congregation at Knox Presbyterian Church in Stratford has confirmed that the church will pursue an ambitious plan to renovate and redevelop portions of the historic downtown church. In partnership with the Stratford Arts and Culture Collective (SACC), Knox has initiated a planning process that will see areas of the church converted to much-needed space for local performance and cultural programming, in addition to ongoing church worship programming and community outreach. SACC represents 30 local artistic and cultural organizations and numerous independent artists that came together four years ago with a shared focus on the development of a community-based performance space.

Knox has recently engaged Trinity Centres Foundation (TCF) to explore financing options, governance models and development requirements for the Church. TCF is Canada’s leading resource for church congregations looking to reconfigure their building use and sustain their community presence.

“The cost of maintaining this beautiful church is a significant challenge for the congregation at Knox,” said Allan Rothwell, Chair of a Task Group struck three years ago to assess future options for the congregation and the building. “Conversations with SACC allowed us to see that we could respond to the real requirement for flexible community-based performance and arts space, along with the need for socially responsible housing, while sustaining our congregation and continuing to serve the community.” A building assessment study commissioned by Knox in March 2017 revealed that the church building needs approximately \$1.6 million in repairs. Additional funds are required to repair the numerous stained-glass windows. So far, the Church has invested \$300,000 in new roofing sections, slate and roof drain repairs.

Last year, Knox commissioned architectural concepts that envisioned new construction to replace the yellow brick section at the back of the church with a revenue-producing socially responsible housing component. Those concepts also proposed additional uses for the sanctuary and other parts of the church building for large and small-scale performance spaces and not-for-profit tenants and their operations.

“Stratford is known world-wide as a leader for high-standard professional arts and culture, yet we lack state-of-the-art theatre, highly flexible performance space where local, community-based organizations can flourish and be showcased,” says Ron Dodson who co-chairs SACC along with Chris Leberg. “With this partnership with Knox, we are answering that call to “expand the tent” to provide facilities for arts and culture for all Stratford citizens to participate in the arts.” SACC was originally interested in participating in development plans for the Grand Trunk site but determined that the more immediate opportunity at Knox was too important to pass up. He notes that there is a strong alignment of the community service values that Knox and SACC share and a desire to be a downtown site for local activities.

This new vision for Knox allows the congregation to continue to use a multi-purpose assembly space designed for regular worship services, as well as the use of the performance space in the sanctuary for special holidays and events. Knox will maintain its community outreach mission and partnerships with a wide range of community services including the Cancer Care Mission. Timelines for these changes will not be determined until TCF completes its initial assessments and delivers a project plan to Knox and SACC.

Both Knox and the SACC are committed to proceeding with a plan that honours and protects the heritage aspects of the red-brick section of the church building while enlivening it with more modern usages. Knox Church was originally built in 1871. A fire destroyed the front portion of the church in 1913, and so the sanctuary section is actually of newer construction, having been constructed post-fire.

Architectural concepts will be developed and shared with both the City of Stratford and the Presbyterian Church of Canada for early conversations about the potential for the building. Project proponents are enthusiastic about the prospect for a collaboration that delivers new space and services for faith, arts and cultural pursuits.

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