

Utopia's Churches

Religion: The Basis of a Community

Religion helps man answer such questions as what is the meaning of life or death and the power of forces beyond the universe. Concepts like this is what brings people together to worship, just as the settlement of Utopia did.

Typical of all small rural communities at the time, Utopia had churches established early in its development. There were (and are) two churches in Utopia: Utopia United Church and St. George's Anglican Church.

In 1869, a Primitive Methodist Congregation began meeting in Utopia (also known as "Essa Crossing" at that time) as part of the Barrie circuit. On September 29, 1872, Utopia United Church opened as a Primitive Methodist Church.⁸ Its construction was a community effort, realized through the encouragement of the Reverend John Milner, the church's first pastor, and built on lands donated by Mr. James Edmundson of Utopia. It is estimated the church cost approximately seven hundred and fifty dollars at that time. In 1884, the Primitive Methodist Church congregation became part of the Methodist Church of Canada, Newfoundland and Bermuda on the Angus circuit. In 1925, the pastoral charge entered the United Church of Canada, as it remains today.⁹

As early as 1862, an Anglican congregation is known to have met in Utopia. A dozen years later, in 1873, what is today known as St. George's Anglican Church, was constructed on land donated for the purpose by Mr. John Jennett. Originally named All Saints, Ballynoscreen, it became St. George's, Utopia in 1874, in honour of George Davis of Ivy whose great interest was important in the church's construction.¹⁰

During the year of 1873 a second frame church was fabricated. The land was donated by a Mr. John Jennett. Twenty-three years later the church was modernized. The walls were paneled with appropriate wood and new seats and gas lamps were installed. In 1938 the outside of the church was covered with imitation brick and painted. (The Centennial Review of the Township of Essa).

Both churches acted as social centres to the community. In 1897, a Ladies Aid Society was formed in connection with what is now Utopia United Church. This organization was responsible for a great number of community interest projects over the years, under a number of different names, until its demise in 1968.¹¹ St. George's Anglican Church formed a Women's Association in March of 1919, which, under its present name of Anglican Church Women, is still serving St. George's Anglican Church's needs in Utopia.¹²

In the early years, churches were often more than merely the spiritual centres of a community. In Utopia, church on Sunday was a most popular happening, serving as an outing for the people and providing a chance to visit. After the service, one could find the men discussing their crops and the women catching up on the "news". In this earlier era, Sunday was considered a day of rest with no labour, an aspect it has lost over time but one that once made Sunday quite special to a farm community like Utopia.

Of course, all this took place after the service. Sunday was considered a day of rest and no labour. Through the years society has lost this aspect of Sundays. As a song reads 'Just give me that good ole time religion'.