

History

The history of the Beaverlodge United Church began 100 years ago in 1910, when a Methodist circuit rider by the name of Rev Charles Hopkins came to the Beaverlodge area and held services at the home of Mary and Oliver "Rutabaga" Johnson. The next year, Rev Hopkins and his student ministers established a church at Halcourt, and two years later a church was built in Lower Beaverlodge.



Halcourt United Church

Rev Hopkins and his student preached to about seventy people who gathered for the dedication of the Lower Beaverlodge church in 1913. The very next week, a prairie fire destroyed the church building! But of course, a church is not the building, and for many years, services were held in the Lower Beaverlodge schoolhouse. Rev Arthur Bentum came to Beaverlodge in 1928 as the first United Church of Canada minister just as the town was in the throes of moving down the hill to be closer to the railway which had just been extended from Wembley. It was deemed impractical to move the school at that time, so services were held in the Victory Hall until grants and loans were arranged to build a new church building. "It was Rev Bentum's unwavering zeal and patient perseverance that made the dream of a new church a reality. It was his ceaseless efforts and endless toil that helped raise the money to pay for the church," was the quote from the Grande Prairie Herald-Tribune.

The congregation honoured Rev Bentum for his efforts by naming the new church after him-Bentum United. On October 27, 1929, the new church building was dedicated. The furnishings were sparse with planks for pews, but the church was filled to capacity. Members recalled the

first services held 19 years earlier in the Johnson home. In the succeeding years, ministers and their wives took a great interest in young people, organizing summer camps at Lake Saskatoon and Red Willow and reviving CGIT (Canadian Girls in Training). Women's groups thrived. There had been a Womens' Missionary Society (WMS) organized for the elder ladies of the church, and around 1939, the minister's wife (Mrs. Edith Thrower) decided there should be a group for the younger women as well. This caused some friction, as the older ladies didn't take too kindly to the idea.

Beginning around 1948, the size of the congregation exploded with as many as seventy-three children in Junior Sunday School. Rev Bob Gates usually held two services a Sunday and often three. In the early 1950s with Rev Donald Fraser, the congregation was persuaded to try the Welles Campaign - a professional fund raising organization that promised to raise \$30,000 - of which \$15,000 was raised. It was a time of spiritual revival as well as a fundraiser for the church.

In the later 1950s, Rev Meredith Banting and his wife brought Beaverlodge United Church to the masses, by taking the choir to Dawson Creek to appear live on the television station. Rev Banting also aired "Bible Briefs by Banting" during the noon hour on CFGP radio in Grande Prairie. During this time the Sunday School, with over 100 students, outgrew the church basement and the congregation bought the old Co-op store (now the Lossing Seniors' Centre). Cupboards and a water system were installed, easing the strain on the ladies. None of them missed having to go to the manse for water for every tea, supper and wash-up. In 1962 the Woman's Association (WA) and the Women's Missionary Society (WMS) joined to form the United Church Women (UCW). Representing the group, Doris McFarlane became the first woman to sit on a church board in Beaverlodge-groundbreaking! Also in 1962 with Rev Barry Moore, the congregation undertook to build a new sanctuary with a capacity of 200 persons. Our present building was dedicated on November 22, 1964. When the church was officially opened its name was changed from Bentum United to Beaverlodge United Church. In just nine years, the mortgage was burned, a tremendous accomplishment for a congregation of about 200.

In 1984 the congregation decided it was time to add a Christian Education wing and a new Social room onto the church building. For the dedication in November, 1984, the Sunday School classes made new banners and all rejoiced! Our church building was finally complete! Through the years, Beaverlodge United Church has had a wonderful variety of ministers, and in fact, has never been without either an ordained minister or a student minister for more than a few months. Beaverlodge United has also been fortunate to have had excellent musical leadership from its clergy. So many of our ministers, have been wonderful musicians who sang (some professionally) and played a wide variety of instruments, from the piano and violin to steel guitar, trombone and even bagpipes. Many ministers seemed to be very sports minded as well, with several stories recalled of brief sermons given by ministers who were eager to finish a service quickly to get a hockey or baseball game going. Music always plays a major part in any church. Mabel Peace and then Edna Sparks provided many, many years of music as the church organist/pianists. We have had choirs, soloists and singing groups over the years. Edna directed

"The Merry Musicians" for several years; they were junior and senior high school band students who played in church and in the community for Remembrance Day ceremonies and for seniors. Each year, our church choir performs in the Service of Lessons and Carols each Christmas in Beaverlodge.

Over the years the Beaverlodge congregation has been very active in ecumenical projects, such as the Da-Tan project which linked Beaverlodge churches to agricultural projects in Tanzania. We were major supporters of the Sheba Faith Hostel in India which housed orphans. With our community, we sponsored two families of "Boat People" from Vietnam, ensuring they had jobs as well as furnished homes to live in. The Beaverlodge Food Bank began in our church basement and was administered by church members until it was taken over in recent years by the Town of Beaverlodge. Our church was home to CGIT, Scouting and Girl Guide groups for many years. In the 80s, our members started the "Triple R Society", which promoted recycling programs, long before they received government funding.

More recently, we were a major supporter of the Beaverlodge Elementary School's breakfast program. Each Christmas, we hosted a very successful Bethlehem Market with Ten Thousand Villages crafts, local crafts and baking, as well as a homemade soup and bagel lunch. We have had an active Healing Touch Ministry with its own beautiful Shalom Room; truly a place of peace. Each year is a time for great celebration!