

## Annual Report 2023

*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

*Corinthians: 6-9*

Welcoming Arms, a registered charity, is a partnership between six local churches providing supportive programs to low-income and marginalized members in our community. Each of the following churches provides financial and volunteer support: Aurora Cornerstone, Aurora United, The Campus Bathurst, Our Lady of Grace, St. Andrew's Presbyterian, and Trinity Anglican Church.

We offer weekly and seasonal programs. Our weekly programs include: Bridging the Gap, Welcome Table and Martha's Table. By the end of the year all of our programs were back to operating out of Trinity's former rectory, Trinity Anglican Church, and St. Andrew's Parish Hall. Our seasonal programs include: The Giving Garden (in conjunction with The Able Network), Tax Prep Program, and Christmas programs.

### **Welcoming Arms' focus includes:**

- **Vision** – A partnership, relieving the burden of poverty in our community.
- **Mission** – Welcoming Arms believes in the inherent dignity of all people. Reflecting Christ's love, we seek to help those in need to experience a fuller participation in society by providing social, economic, and spiritual support.
- **Strategic Planning** – New objectives are developed every 3 – 5 years to reflect and build better infrastructure, governance, policies, and procedures. Our Strategic Plan was extended for yet another year and will be reviewed in 2024.

The Vision, Mission and Strategic Planning reflect the compassion, joy and love of Welcoming Arms' volunteers and clergy.

### **Management/ Executive Council**

All of our programs continued to support our community throughout 2023, in a mixture of fashions as this was yet another (thankfully final) year of transition out of pandemic restrictions. Please see the program reports for the details.

We were successful in hiring a new Program Manager late in the year, and the rewards were seen almost immediately. Sally Freitas has brought a passionate and dedicated drive into our little organization that has been missing for some time. Apart from being a very organized manager, Sally is also a registered Social Worker and her skills in this area have benefitted all three of our

main programs, but most directly our Bridging the Gap outreach program. We are excited about what we can get accomplished in 2024!

Our EC Membership had no changes in 2023, we are grateful for the continued support of all of our Members.

### **Program Manager**

I want to extend my deepest gratitude for the incredible support during my transition into my new position.

Since taking my post on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023 it has been a whirlwind of activity.

We quickly pulled together a Giving Tuesday on-line campaign that netted considerable donations, followed by the Christmas season's activities including Christmas Assistance, Frank's Organic Garden event and the WT Christmas dinner.

A donor acknowledgment process was established and customized thank you notes with our logo were quickly put to use.

Increasing our visibility in the community was prioritized through social media posts, attending community events, the creation and distribution of a 'one-pager' to area social service agencies, and creating partnerships with other programs to reduce food waste and increase food security.

Volunteer recruitment, retention and training processes were developed and the Team and Program Leads were acknowledged in November for International Volunteer Manager's Day.

In summary, my first two months on the job – and last two months of the year, were extremely rewarding due to the incredible team of volunteers, the dedication and knowledge that Keri brings to her role, and the support of the very active and hands-on Executive Council. I'd like to give a very special thank you to Doug and Margot, your guidance, patience and encouragement have made a significant difference and I truly appreciate all you've done to help me succeed. I know we can all do great things together in the coming years!

### **Weekly Programs**

#### **Bridging the Gap**

Twice a week and 48 weeks of the year, we receive our Visitors at the Rectory to offer practical help as well as hope and encouragement. We are there to listen with our hearts and ears, building relationships as our Visitors share their triumphs and struggles. We also offer and provide grocery gift cards, vouchers for clothing, basic toiletries, and at times bus tickets. When need arises we also share information about other community agencies and services that may meet certain needs.

Here is an overview of the activities during this last year as we look back:

- We had 1205 visits from Aurora families

- We distributed \$76,120 in grocery gift cards
- We distributed toiletries, cleaning supplies, diapers and such (mostly donations from participating churches, local organizations and purchases from WAs)
- Provided to Homeless persons, Tim Hortons cards, water, bus tickets, and available coats, backpacks, blankets...

We are staffed by approximately 30 faithful volunteers, mostly from our congregations. Our hours are Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30 til 11:00. We deliver practical supports to individuals who are disabled or ill. This year we have been especially challenged with the needs of Newcomers to our country and claiming refugee status. Their language skills in English are at times non-existent and due to our housing shortages and the influx of many such cases, the challenges are great to settle in Aurora. We as an organization have learned new information about the Canadian immigration policies and organizations that are best equipped to meet these needs. We have found ways to share this extremely helpful information and have compiled it all into a brochure.

Our volunteers are very important to us, and we always strive to offer training support on the latest trends and concerns. We are always looking for ways to improve our interactions between our Visitors and Volunteers in a safe and secure way.

All of us who serve feel truly blessed as we attempt to bless others and follow Jesus' invitation to:

Love one another as I have loved you! John 13-34

Submitted by Gisele Bedard

## **Welcome Table**

2023 was a year of changes for The Welcome Table. We gradually moved from our COVID format of take-out meals back to our sit-down dinner, welcoming the community into Binions Hall, not only for a nourishing meal but also for fellowship and support.

In January we were in our take-out format, serving up to 170 meals every Wednesday. This format worked well, but we knew it was time to get back to the roots of what Welcome Table is all about – feeding and providing fellowship to those in need in our community.

In May, we started a hybrid format to our program. We welcomed guests to come inside the Historic Chapel to eat their meal if they would like or they could continue to pick up their take-out meal and eat it elsewhere. Very few people (about 12 each week), chose to eat inside and we continued to have large numbers for those who chose take-out.

On September 13th we stopped the hybrid format and only provided meals to those who came inside Binions Hall. This reduced the numbers of meals going out drastically however, the guests who joined us inside all seemed to benefit from the program. We now get 60-65 guests inside each week. In addition, we provide 18-20 meals each week for Routes for Community which delivers meals to people who cannot make it to Trinity. This totals 80-85 meals served.

Moving the program back inside required changes to our four volunteer teams. We now have revived the old volunteer roles for each team such as Friend, Greeter (security), dishwashers, servers, scrapers, bakers etc. Sally has been working on new role descriptions for these jobs. Chefs have also had to change the format of their meals so they can be served from a buffet. Just like how we had to 'pivot' when COVID hit, we have had to 'pivot' again to an inside format.

We have had some challenges along the way. The stove and oven in the Trinity Kitchen were not operational from May 8th to July 13th. This meant that our chefs had to be creative with their meals by using the BBQs, the Legions kitchen, COSTCO and in some cases, we had to purchase meals from caterers etc.

We also have some new aspects to our program. We have a pastoral schedule in which clergy from all our Welcoming Arms churches rotate coming to WT, providing a blessing at the start of the meal and support to our guests. We also now have a wonderful relationship with the Aurora Food Pantry which provides us with protein for our meal when they have excess (which seems to be often). Team Leads now have access to Breeze (thank you Margot) which allows them to keep track of their volunteers more conveniently.

WT is blessed with a large and amazing group of volunteers who enthusiastically come out every four weeks to provide support to the community. We are lucky to have all of them! The addition of Sally to our program has been so wonderful. Sally comes to most of our dinners and provides valuable support to our guests and volunteers. She has been so important in helping to run things smoothly. Thank you Sally for all you do.

Respectfully submitted by Barb Allan

### **Martha's Table**

Martha's Table operates out of St, Andrew's Presbyterian Church at the corner of Mosley and Victoria Streets. Lunch is served from 11:30 am to 1 pm. We have a dedicated group of people who come out week after week to help with this Outreach Mission. However, we do take a break for the months of July and August. We serve on an average 45-50 meals a week and we also deliver to some shut-ins. From the ones who make the soups, sandwiches, cut-up fruit, package celery and carrots sticks, and the ones who make the baked goods we thank you. We also thank the Able Network who buy our groceries, help with the set-up on Thursday mornings, and make one soup. The persons eating in do give to 'Gifts from the Heart' and the ones getting delivery give through the Church. This enables us to draw a minimal amount from the Welcoming Arms account.

Submitted by Anne Neuman and Denyse Slack

### **Seasonal Programs**

#### **Income Tax Preparation**

During the month of April, volunteers who are comfortable with preparing tax returns, volunteered their time so we could provide free Income Tax return preparation to our visitors. This was, once again, done following COVID-19 protocols using a contactless process. Most governmental social service programs are based on information from tax returns, so it is critical for our visitors to file their returns, on time, every year. We are now set up to provide income tax preparation throughout the year on an appointment basis to meet the increasing need of our community.

### **Christmas Dream Dinner**

Due to lack of attendance by our visitors over the past two years, this event was not held in 2023. This was a joint decision of all members of this community group, including The Salvation Army (TSA), Welcoming Arms, and several community leaders. We did, however, partner with The Salvation Army to provide a special Christmas meal on December 20<sup>th</sup> (regularly scheduled WT meal). Volunteers from TSA were on-site, along with Santa and Mrs. Claus, and live music. Guests at the meal each received a gift (Shoe Box Project for women, socks for men and a toy for children).

### **Welcoming Arms/Society of St. Vincent de Paul (Christmas Assistance)**

Sign-up for Christmas Assistance for Bridging the Gap (BTG) visitors to Welcoming Arms took place every Tuesday and Thursday morning during the month of November 2023. Visitors chose from four dates between December 5<sup>th</sup> to December 14<sup>th</sup> for pick up of their packages, which included grocery gift cards, children's stockings, if applicable, and a bag for single adults. A number of visitors were assigned delivery of their packages by members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVP) during the first ten days of December.

One hundred and eleven (111) individuals/families registered. Among these were 5 homeless representing six people. One hundred and seventy-one (171) adults (18 and over) and seventy-seven (77) children were assisted for a total of two hundred and forty-eight (248) individuals.

The dollar value of the grocery gift cards was \$125 for singles, \$175 for two member families, \$225 for three member families, and \$275 for four or more family members. Homeless individuals received a \$25 grocery cards and a \$15 Tim's card.

Welcoming Arms supported 89 families (137 adults/61 children) with \$15,385 in grocery cards; the Society of St. Vincent de Paul supported 22 families (34 adults/16 children) with \$3,900 in grocery cards for a total of \$19,285.

The Aurora Minor Hockey Association (AMHA) raised approximately \$7,900 to support the BTG Christmas Giving and Welcome Table programs. This year the AMHA provided 77 generous stockings for all children under the age of 18.

The Campus Church (Youth Ministry) put together 110 bags of assorted items for single adults and/or couples without children.

The visitors to BTG were extremely appreciative for the assistance they received this Christmas.

Submitted by Susan Lanthier-Doyle; Co-Coordinator of the Christmas Assistance Program

### **Fundraising and donations**

The pandemic is now firmly in our rearview mirror, thank goodness; however, the echo effects are still having an impact. We continue to see escalating costs for all aspects of day to day life as well as organizational operations. But most significant of which are the continued and increased impacts of rising costs and constrained services on our Guests.

We have been fortunate to have very generous donors – both small and large; however, as we have stated previously, long term we will need to secure more stable funding.

Sustainable funding for our programming continues to be the key priority moving forward.

From a fundraising perspective, in 2023, we were less fortunate than in previous years as we were not eligible for some of the previous funding sources such as the Mayors Golf Tournament (we have been recipients too many years in a row) and the Magna Hoedown Community Grants as well as the MAZON Foundation grant (as our balance was too high due to the accumulation of funds from the salary vacancy in the position of the Program Manager; we were ineligible). As we have now secured a wonderful Program Manager, the draw down on funds to pay the salary will eliminate this issue when we apply for the next round of grants.

In terms of successful grants, we received \$5k from United Way Greater Toronto; Reaching Home, funding for people experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk of homelessness over the winter. Then we received an additional \$7.5 k from UWGT (there was a call for proposal again for the same program - Reaching Home).

We were chosen as one of the recipients again this year for Empty Bowls - that was announced in late 2023.

We were once again, the fortunate recipients of generous funding from a variety of sources – Pine Tree Potters Guild “Empty Bowls”, our partner institutions (including an endowment fund from TAC) and last, but not least, the donors both individual and corporate that provide the backbone of our funding year after year. The support from our parishes and respective parishioners is tremendously appreciated!

In November, we ran a Giving Tuesday online campaign that raised approximately \$2,900. There were no costs associated with the campaign and all donations were received through Canada Helps.

While we have a track record of success when applying for grants; for example, MAZON for multiple years, UWGT and others, however, we have been notably less successful in identifying potential granting opportunities. Recognizing this ongoing issue, Council agreed to move forward with an application to the Ontario Trillium Foundation; a source of, potentially, significant and longer-term funding. Discussions of what the grant application will look like and to what program fund we will apply, will take place in 2024, with an application going forward in Fall 2024.

In addition to the OTF application, Council agreed to restart our fundraising events, bringing back, for the first time in 4 years, the world famous (well, perhaps locally famous) Welcome Table Trivia Night. Planning for the event began in earnest Fall 2023, with a date of May 11th for the event. Sponsorships were successfully secured in the amount of approximately \$10,000; thus the event will be a rousing success!

Thus, in addition to grant applications, fund raising was comprised of primarily direct appeals via social media, word of mouth and leveraging past donor or sponsors for continued support.

The operationalization of the original fundraising plan – reviewed and approved by the Executive Council – was shelved until the Hiring of the new Program Manager Ms. Sally Frietas. With Sally on board, we will be redrafting the plan to better reflect the roles and responsibilities of the Committee so that we have a truly workable plan for the next 3 years!

Though any donation is welcome, there is a need to secure sustainable funding. Thus, the focus of the work of the fundraising committee in 2024 will be to revamp the approved fundraising plan with a focus on the OTF grant application as well as smaller grants, corporate giving and, donor recognition.

Submitted by Alison Collins-Mrakas

Welcoming Arms is located at 44 Metcalfe Street. Our organization is normally staffed by over 200 dedicated volunteers (we currently have 85 active volunteers), the majority coming from our six partner churches that support Welcoming Arms.

We welcome your continued interest and involvement in this vital community organization.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Doug Steele', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Doug Steele  
Welcoming Arms  
Chair, Executive Council