



December's Service Theme: Peace

How are we a people of peace? This month the Beacon community explores the meaning of peace in their lives, in the congregation and in the world around us. We will reflect on questions such as these: What is a source of peace for you? Where do you go to find peace? Who are your peace mentors? Are human beings capable of living peacefully? How do we achieve a 'world community of peace'?

DEC 3 **Give Peace a Chance?**
Rev. Debra Thorne
From their hotel bed in Montreal in 1969 John and Yoko sang 'Give Peace a Chance' and it became the worldwide anthem for a peace movement. Do we still yearn for peace or have we become habituated to the violence around us? Are we prepared to embrace the challenge of our time—to hold peace in our hearts without closing ourselves off from the violence of the world?

DEC 10 **Singing our Way Through**
Special Guest: Patti Powell
Service Leaders: Donna Hamilton and Janet Pivnick
The darkness that envelops us as we move towards winter brings with it moments of quiet contemplation and peace. As we enter into stillness, we also find the spark of wonder and anticipation. Join us for a musical journey through this dark time of year with song leading and sharing by Patti Powell. Patti leads community choirs in Vancouver and New Westminster, and she led the choral workshop at Camp Sasamat this past year.
• Choir sings.

DEC 17 **The No-Rehearsal Christmas Pageant!**
Rev. Debra Thorne, Ashley Cole, Director of Religious Exploration, and all of you!
What would December be without the annual Christmas pageant? This year, we will all be called upon to help create the well-known story. There will be costumes, songs to sing, and of course many animals who want to see this babe who was born in their barn. Please join us for this wonderful family celebration of community and creativity.
• Choir sings.

DEC 24 **7:00 PM only Christmas Eve: Peace Reborn**
Rev. Debra Thorne and Guests
Music by Ming-Xuan Chung
Christmas Eve holds our deep yearning for peace—in our hearts and in the world. In the dark of the winter when the light of the sun is weakest, a story is told of the light returning. This evening we remind ourselves of the story through poetry and music, of the fulfillment of prophesy and hope. The birth of the Christ is a met-

aphor to calm our minds and lighten our souls. Come and listen, come and sing, come and be comforted, come and be renewed.
NOTE: There is no service in the morning on December 24th.

DEC 31 **Twaking My Story**
Service Coordinators: Vrindy Spencer and Marilyn Médén
What makes your story? Marilyn Médén and Vrindy Spencer use two local and true events (one involving risk) to invite you to reflect on why we act the way we do. How can you influence yourself? What would you like as part of your story, and to send as a ripple into the world?



Beacon Unitarian Church

Sunday worship services and religious exploration classes are held at the Sapperton Pensioners Hall, 318 Keary Street, New Westminster. Services start at 10:30 am. More info at www.beaconunitarian.org.

Minister's Message



Rev. Debra Thorne

Many religions create a story about the cycle of the earth's seasons, the lengthening and shortening of the days. Our emotions are affected

by the short days of winter, and we often 'hibernate' through the long winter nights. Back in our human history, before science explained why the days got shorter in the cold season, we created stories to explain the changing seasons.

December 21st is the darkest day of the year in the northern hemisphere and the day celebrated by many as the beginning of the returning of the light. The 21st of December is the Winter Solstice, marked by celebrations in Pagan and Wiccan traditions. The word *solstice* is derived

from the Latin *sol* (sun) and *sistere* (to stand still), because at the solstice, the Sun stands still in its decline.

In the Shinto religion of Japan it is called the Grand Ceremony of the Winter Solstice or 'Tohiji-taisai'. Tohiji-taisai celebrates the joy of the ending of the yin period of the sun when it declines in strength and the beginning of its growing power or yang period. In Japanese spirituality, the sun represents *Amaterasu Omikami*, who is the sun goddess and guiding spirit of the Japanese people. The story goes that Amaterasu was insulted by another god and so hid away in a cave and so the light went out of the world. She refused to come out no matter how hard the other gods tried to trick her. Finally another goddess, Amenouzume, in an impersonation of a strip tease, danced so wildly that all the gods couldn't stop laughing. The laughter was heard by Amaterasu

deep in her dark cave and she got curious. When she peeked out of the cave entrance another god put a mirror to her face and her own light dazzled her. Amaterasu was yanked out of her cave and told she could no longer hide her light away. And so once more the world was bathed in radiant sunlight.

As the days of light wane I invite you to take this opportunity to rest in the dark, the gentle and comforting dark. Light a candle rather than turning on the electric light. Try sitting in the dark for a while, doing nothing but listening to the sounds of the earth. Listen to the wind in the branches of the trees. Listen to the rain on the window. Allow your life to become quieter. Contemplate 'peace'.

With warm care for all Beaconites,
—Rev. Debra Thorne

Holiday

CRAFT FAIR and BAKE SALE

Sunday, November 26, 2017

12:00 to 2:00 pm

318 Keary Street, New West

Funds raised will go to the "Settlement 2" task force to bring four additional members of the Al Rbaai family to New Westminster.

Holiday Photographs

At the sale, Susan Millar and Deepak Sahasrabudhe will be taking pictures for anyone wanting prints, cards, or digital images of themselves and family for Christmas/Holiday distribution. Wear your Sunday Best!

Board Bitz

Well! We've just come through a most successful Pledge Drive! The Board would like to thank everybody who pledged for 2018—your generosity means that we are a good way toward supporting Debra at ¾ time. You may remember that our previous budgets have only supported a ½ time minister—and we were able to have Debra at ¾ time due to the generosity of an anonymous donor. Much appreciated by us all.

The Board would like to acknowledge the extraordinary job done by the Pledge Drive team, chaired so capably by Susan Tarras. The team worked very hard on this drive, and brought all the bits and pieces together to enable us to exceed our target. Well done, and huge thanks!

The next step is to bring the budget to the congregation for adoption. A copy of the budget will be sent out via email, or by mail, so you can have a look at it before our Annual Budget Meeting on Sunday, December 3rd, right after the service. Our Treasurer, Carol Woodworth, and the rest of the board will be there to answer any questions you may have. Anyone can ask questions, but only members will be able to vote. There will also be a soup lunch, so bring your appetite.

Speaking of generosity, (and soup lunches), we'd like to say a huge THANK YOU to Peggy Lunderville who has generously given both her

time and energy to organizing soup lunches for many years. She has also been instrumental in starting up and running our nursery. She will be gradually handing over the reins of both, as her life has become rather filled up with grandchildren, with the birth of twins to her son Ben and his wife, Barbara, who already have a two year old. Although her help and guidance will be very much missed, this opens up a wonderful opportunity for anyone who would like to become more involved in our community. Volunteering at Beacon is very fun and rewarding, and great way to meet new friends. If you would like to help out with either the nursery or soup lunches, please talk to a board member after the service or email the board at board@beaconunitarian.org.

John Hagen has taken on the large task of putting together a list of places that Beacon can use for meetings and special events. Sapperton Old Age Pensioners Hall is great for Sundays and large events, but is a little too big, and a little too expensive for smaller events and meetings. We have a few members that let us use the amenities rooms in their buildings, but these rooms are not always available when we need them. If you have a meeting room or amenities room in your building, or know of any reasonably priced (or free) meeting spaces that we can add to our list please let us know. You can talk to John directly,



David Kristjanson



Donna Hamilton

or you can email the board at board@beaconunitarian.org.

Please also remember that December brings us a few special events, including the Children's Christmas Pageant on December 17th and the Christmas Eve Service on December 24th.

Thank you all for being here in 2017 to Connect, Inspire and Transform.

From all of us on the Board, we wish you a Happy Holiday Season and a very Happy New Year.

— David Kristjanson and
Donna Hamilton, Co-Presidents

Could you be a Lay Chaplain?

The Canadian Unitarian Council has a fine program for vetting and training and helping members become and be lay chaplains. If this is something that calls to you or that you may consider, please have a conversation with Rev. Debra Thorne or Beacon's serving Lay Chaplain Marilyn Meden. We anticipate a start in the Spring of 2018.



**Beacon
Unitarian
Church**

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**Deadline for the December issue of
The Beacon: November 15, 2017**

Let's Connect: Behind the Scenes

Have you ever wondered how Beacon manages to have wonderful music each Sunday? Well it takes a whole village, as the saying goes! Musicians and directors, singers and organizers! The Connections Team wanted to go behind the scenes and check out how music happens on Sundays. Here is what I discovered.

It is the Beacon Music Committee that organizes and directs our little village of musicians and supporters. The committee meets several times a year and takes on the responsibility of managing a budget, and also works with Rev. Debra to select choir music that fits with each service. They make sure there is a pianist every Sunday and a choir director who rehearses with the choir each week to prepare for presentations a couple of times each month.

Our pianist Ming-Xuan attends each choir rehearsal, comes early on "choir Sundays" and provides us with fabulous music every Sunday. He told me he loves to play for Beacon. He knows there are many who appreciate his music.

This fall, our previous choir director, Charlene Dubrule, resigned for family reasons and the committee has been hard at work searching for a new director. They hope to have hired someone by the new year. In the meantime, both Sue Sparlin and Marylke Nieuwenhuis (long time Beacon members and accomplished musicians) have been filling in.

Once Rev. Debra and the worship committee have developed the monthly themes for the year, the music committee works on finding music that the choir can sing, and makes sure there is enough music for each choir member. Donna Hamilton stores the extensive music library (accumulated over 30 years of the choir's existence) in her basement. Marylke Nieuwenhuis is the music librarian, whose job it is to keep track of the music, distributing it for rehearsals and collecting it after performances (there can be anywhere from 12–20 singers in the choir). One choir member even records and sends audio files by email or posts it on the Beacon website for members to learn

the music. Keeping the choir members informed and reminded about events and music selections is a big job.

The budget allows the committee to rent space for rehearsals at Miller Park School in Coquitlam, purchase sheet music, and provide funds to pay for the choir director and accompanist.

I asked choir members what they like about being in the choir and the common response, not surprisingly, was "I love to sing". They also said: "I enjoy the camaraderie of the group at rehearsals", "it's good for the brain", and "I feel more energized after choir". Several love to see our choir dog, Casey, who attends most rehearsals and lies quietly, enjoying the singing.

You can see it takes a lot of committed folk working behind the scenes to prepare music for Beacon's weekly services. If you "love to sing" and want to enjoy the group experience of rehearsing together, consider joining the church choir.

—Submitted by Joan Morris on behalf of the Connections Team: Phil Campbell, Jean Donaldson, Joyce Gudaitis, Joan Morris, Susan Tarras, Rev. Debra Thorne



Enthusiastic singers at choir rehearsal. *Missing: Joan Morris, Phil Campbell, Elizabeth Campbell, Michael Scales*

Religious Explorations



Ashley Cole

Before I get into all the fun planned for December, I wanted to say thank you to Tyler Ewasiuk for assisting in R.E. for the month of November. Also a big thank you to Judy Villet and Amber Strocel for taking the lead on November 19th and making fabulous crafted cards!!

Now on to December! Our sights are set on December 17th which is when R.E. will be hosting the Sunday service for our yearly pageant. This year's play is titled *The No-rehearsal Christmas Pageant* which will tell the story of Jesus' birth in a fun, participatory way.

On December 2nd, from 5:30–8:30 pm, will be the Night Tree Party, a time to come together and eat, read the Night Tree story, and then make some crafty treats for local wildlife, to be strung on a nearby tree, while singing winter songs.

If you would like to stay up to date with what is happening in R.E. reach out to me, Ashley Cole at sundayschool@beaconunitarian.org and I can add your email address to our weekly email blast that comes out on Fridays.

Wishing you all a season of cheer!

—Ashley Cole, Director of Religious Explorations

In memoriam



Joyce Marguerite Hale, mother of Brythan, (Bryn) Hale, died with her son lovingly at her side. Joyce will be remembered for her passion and skill in teaching and creating visual art pieces. She was an avid singer in the Sacred Web Choir, singing

songs that celebrate life, spirituality, social justice, peace, and the Earth. Joyce rigorously lived a life of simplicity and gentleness. Her inspiration was nature and wise and deep conversations with her dearest friends. Memorial Service: 2:00 pm, Sat., Nov. 25 at the Sapperton Pensioners' Hall, 318 Keary Street, New Westminster.

Multifaith Calendar 2018

The Power of Inspiration

The Beacon Religious Exploration (RE) program is taking orders for the 2018 issue of the Multifaith calendar. The Multifaith Calendar offers insight into the world's major faiths—a window that gives not only accurate information on each of the major holidays and festivals, but detailed historical information of these faiths and their relationship in time.

Beautiful and varied artwork, on the theme of "The Power of Inspiration", illumines each month.

Calendars sell for **\$15.95**, with \$6/calendar going towards the RE social justice project. To order, please speak to, or email Laura Redmond (lauraredmond2@telus.net) by December 3th. Pick up your calendar on either Sunday, Dec. 10 or 17.

Makes a beautiful Christmas gift.

The gift that gives twice... Order by Dec. 3rd

Beacon Programs

We invite you to explore these great ways to connect to the Beacon community and yourself!

Soul Matters Groups delve into the monthly sermon themes. Part personal sharing, part spiritual deepening, the groups meet monthly either at 1 pm on the 3rd Wednesday, or 7 pm on the 3rd Thursday of the month. Email minister@beaconunitarian.org for more information.

The Humanist Discussion Group meets the last Sunday of the month at *The Astoria Retirement Home* (2245 Kelly Avenue, Port Coquitlam) to discuss a wide range of current topics. See the sidebar below for the November topic and time. There is no meeting scheduled for December—the next meeting will be on January 28th when Luc Beaudoin will speak on the placebo effect.

Join the Beacon Choir for musical fun and skill development. Rehearsals are usually every Tuesday at 7:30 pm at Miller Park School in Coquitlam—but this month rehearsals are only December 5th and 12th. Contact choirdirector@beaconunitarian.org.

Lunch Bunch meets every Thursday at noon, year-round. Bring your own lunch and share in lively and topical conversation. Contact John Hagen 604-521-1335.

Book Club meetings are held on the 4th Thursday of each month at 7 pm. For meeting location details contact John Hagen, ajhagen@telus.net.

Book for December: *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles

Settlement 2 meeting on December 10th. The Settlement 2 task force is organizing the sponsorship of 4 further members of the Al Rbaai family. All welcome. Please contact Peggy Lunderville for time: prlunder@gmail.com.

Sunday, Dec. 3, Noon
Congregational
Budget Meeting and
Soup Lunch.

Attend a Circle Dinner and connect with other Beaconites in a relaxed setting. For more information contact Donna Hamilton (donna-h@telus.net) or Joan Morris (joanmorris@telus.net).

Attend a 'Getting to Know U' session to meet other newcomers and deepen your knowledge of how Beacon functions and what Unitarianism is. Please contact Rev. Debra (minister@beaconunitarian.org) if you are interested in attending the next meeting.

Youth Group: The Beacon Youth Group is reforming. If you would like information contact Ashley Cole downstairs most Sundays.

Help out on Sunday mornings as a Coffee Host (contact Glenn Wootton, wootongg@gmail.com), **or sign-up as a Sunday Morning Greeter** (contact Susan Tarras, starras@telus.net).

Beacon Writers' Group will take a break for the Christmas holidays and won't be meeting in December. If you are drawn to writing as a way to explore the questions that move within you, the moments that fill you with awe or the circumstances that lead you to contemplation, consider joining us when we reconvene in January. No writing experience needed. Date and location will be announced in the January newsletter. For more information contact Janet Pivnick at jpivnick@gmail.com.

Humanist Group: Sunday, November 26, 7 pm

Claiming Our Intergenerational Place at the Fire – The Role of the Elder – as Sage



Art by Josephine Harrison

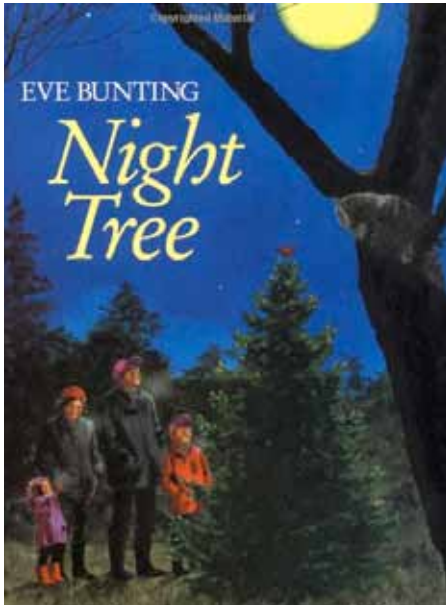
Let us look at the wisdom of inviting our young people—children, adolescents, and young adults—back into the circle to share the wisdom of our lives well-lived, and learn of their lives, challenged by navigating a future we never dreamed of. Together, we could discover what it is that makes us come alive; what calls us to faith and hope for a brave, new world?

Joy Silver and North Shore Unitarian friend Dr. Maurice Gibbons will describe anthropologist, Margaret Mead's three cultural paradigms in terms of their teaching/learning relationships between the young and the old, and lead us in discussion.

Resources:

- <https://glennbergerblog.wordpress.com/2009/10/21/a-book-review-the-making-of-an-elder-culture-by-theodore>
- *Claiming Your Place at the Fire*, Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro, (2004)
- *Evolutionary Parenting* by David Marshak (2016)
- *Culture and Commitment* by Margaret Mead

Upcoming Events



Night Tree Party & Advent Wreath Social

Date: Saturday, December 2, 2017

Time: 5:30–8:00 pm

Place: Home of Peggy Lunderville (Close to Gaglardi exit on Hwy. 1)

Phone: 604-522-3001

Bring: A contribution of food for the potluck dinner. Warm clothing and a flashlight for decorating an outdoor tree.

Who: All welcome, all ages.

RSVP: Peggy Lunderville, 604-522-3001 or prlunder@gmail.com. If you forget to RSVP, please come anyhow!

Christmas gifts for our feathered and furry friends

“Night Tree” is a story by Eve Bunting that tells of a family’s annual Christmas tradition of making edible ornaments for neighbourhood wildlife, and using them to decorate a tree in the forest. At our party, you can string cranberries and popcorn on thread, or add peanut butter and seeds to pinecones. After, we’ll go outside and hang our ornaments on a tree and sing carols in the moonlight.

Advent Wreath

Join us in making an advent wreath out of cedar boughs and candles. The advent wreath becomes an important part of the Sunday morning services in December. We may sing a few carols. Please plan on joining us for this special celebration!



CHALICE CHOIR ADVENT CONCERT: Sunday, December 3rd, 7:30 pm

Please join us for our annual Advent concert at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver (Oak & 49th). This year, our concert is a tribute to St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music who symbolizes the central role of music in our lives. The concert will feature Gounod’s St. Cecilia Mass with three wonderful soloists—Kat Vriesema-Magnuson, Lyndon Ladeur and Bryan Gick—and the Chalice Choir accompanied by a small orchestra led by our dear friends and wonderful musicians, Edgar Bridwell and Anne Duranceau. And of course, we will have other treats for you: seasonal offerings and a singalong, followed by a reception in Hewett Centre. Tickets are \$20, available at the door. Please join us!

The Friendship

I have a friendship with the western red cedar. These trees fill my head with their fresh scent, delight my eyes with their complex branches and fronds, and their bark tingles my hands when I caress it.

This friendship has lasted my lifetime. First Nation peoples have had more profound friendships, for thousands and thousands of years. For them the relationship has included canoes and paddles and clothing and basketry... a blessing that reaches back into the ancient past.

Yet this friendship is threatened. Threatened by the droughts that are pounding all our growing things, droughts staying longer than ever before. My friends the cedars are not built to withstand such torture; they are not thriving. They cannot move out of the way or migrate to wetter places. The little trees are dying and the big trees are suffering. We will lose our cedars.

How can I claim friendship if I allow this to happen? What kind of friend am I, who stands by and watches? I ask myself what can I do?

I am a friend who is making noise about climate change, taking part in protests and marches, talking, talking, talking... And watering a cedar when I can, that's another thing I can do.

Sometimes it doesn't feel like much of a contribution to a friendship, other days it is clearly all that I can manage.

My friendship with the western red cedar is not eternal. It will come to an end. And I pledge anew to doing whatever I can to sustain my friends.

—Teresa Morton



Jane Shoemaker (left) visited Judy Villet's art show, "Canadian Colours" on opening night. Michael Scales and Judy Villet at right.

CANADIAN COLOURS

Being born in Canada has always felt like a great blessing. I want to share my passion for this country through my textile art. I was 15 when the Union Jack flag was changed to the Maple Leaf. The clean, simple, graphic lines of the Canadian flag have become my framework for the changing seasons, landscapes, politics and demographics of Canada.

I use very basic piecing techniques with a complex design process, assembling commercially printed fabrics, often cutting them to 2" squares and placing them on a design wall where I can study the value, colour and line before sewing them together. I use a domestic sewing machine to quilt three layers, adding texture and cohesion to the fabric design. One piece has words quilted into the free-motion design that emphasis my positive feelings about Canada, especially strong after living and travelling abroad. Another, darker flag expresses my fears of government secrecy, repression, and isolation.

With gratitude for those who welcomed us here and helped us survive, and a hand open to welcome newcomers, my hope is to warm your heart with my love of this land. Help me celebrate the last 150 years of growth of this giant young country.

—Judy Villet

The Canadian Colours exhibit runs until December 22nd in Place Des Arts community centre at 1120 Brunette Ave, Coquitlam, BC V3K 1G2. Due to classes and activities the hours are erratic: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday 9–2:30; Tuesday 12:30–2:30; Friday 9–9; Saturday 3:30–5; and Sunday 1–5.

On **Wednesday, November 29th**, Mary Bennett from UCV is organizing a guided tour with Judy. To start, meet at Judy's studio at 100 Braid Street at 1:00 pm. The tour will continue at Place Des Arts at 2:00 pm. The tour will conclude with refreshments at a local café. Please join us!

News from the Canadian Unitarian Council

Tips for intentionally Inclusive Congregations: Part 2

Welcoming Children in Worship

Helping families and their children in worship is a goal that many congregations have and is also one that can represent a significant challenge. If you currently worship without many children, having them in your services can disrupt the status quo. Congregations that manage successfully to include children have acknowledged that the change may be difficult for some. Adults who have hearing challenges may find the bustle of children makes it difficult to hear. Some adults, thinking they are easing the burden of parents, will offer discipline to children. Yet, discipline (even of the gentlest kind) without relationship is rarely welcomed. Having activity packs for children, inviting them to be participants in the service, getting to know them, and congregational willingness to be changed by their presence is important. <http://refocus-ministry.org/.../practical-ways-to-welcome-kid.../>

LGBTQ: Welcoming Congregations

Since 1990 when the UUA published the *Welcoming Congregation Guide for Congregations* most Canadian Congregations have engaged with the work of attaining the *Welcoming* status. In fact 99% of Canadian Unitarian Universalists belong to one of our Welcoming Congregations. And since *Civil Marriage Act (2005)* became the law of the land it seems to some as if our work in this area is behind us. However if congregations want to be explicitly and intentionally welcoming to LGBTQ individuals they'd be wise to do a quick assessment of some of their practices. Here are a few ideas to help you ensure your congregation is being as welcoming as you want to be:

- claim your welcome out loud and in print
- ensure you have at least one gender neutral bathroom
- question the language you use: consider parent instead of mother; add alternatives to male/female binary language.

Most importantly, your congregation can do more work in this area by revisiting the updated Welcoming Congregation program. Once completed, congregations can apply for a Welcoming Congregation renewal. For more information about the program visit: <http://cuc.ca/welcoming-congregations/>

Learning from Congregations that are Growing

If we are trying to be inclusive and welcoming we might reasonably look at characteristics of growing churches...clearly they are getting something right. Here are some of the traits of growing congregations in the literature. Consider how they might inform your congregational choices:

1. Growing congregations focus on their health more than church growth. If your congregation is beset by conflict, poor decision making capacity, lacklustre programming, then a focus on congregational health is in order.
2. Growing congregations do what they do very well. Congregations with high quality Sunday services, programs and music are ones that people like to be around.
3. Growing churches are vigilant about their mission, vision and core values. Knowing who you are, what you want to achieve and what values inform you should be key to all your decision making. In turn, your congregation will be one new-

comers can understand. If you can't articulate who you are, they won't know what they are joining.

4. Growing churches ruthlessly stop some programming. There is a tendency to add programs, with the idea that they will provide more 'sticking places' for newcomers. However a hard look at what you do, and the decision to eliminate some of the programs will free up energy for programming which is particularly energizing. Some people will not be happy.
5. Growing churches know that things have to change. Unless you change, you can't expect different results.
6. Growing churches celebrate. They find ways to have fun together because they are proud of who they are and what they do.

Parking

If parking is at a premium on Sunday mornings, consider reserving special parking spots for visitors to make it easier for them to come through your doors. Encourage regulars and staff to park off-site or in more remote spaces. Post clear signs for visitors, letting them know you're thinking about them.

Mark Entrances Clearly

When visitors come, do they know what entrance they should use? Are there doors which look like entrances but which aren't used? Clearly posted signs to entrances, an accessible ramp and the elevator, takes some of the pressure off of visitors who might be too nervous to ask for help.

(Excerpted from: <http://cuc.ca/congregational-life/tips-for-intentionally-inclusive-congregations/>)

Feeding a Community: Insights on Mount Pleasant's Food Education Programs

Liz Goode, Bette Goode's daughter, shared the following article with Beacon—a beautiful example of how one program *connects, inspires* and *transforms* its clientele.

Like many new immigrants, Aya* found the process of adjusting to her new life in Vancouver difficult and lonely.

That is, until she found her way to the Cooking Club program at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House (MPNH). Through participation in these peer-run cooking workshops, Aya found a new way to engage with her community, make new friends, and lift herself out of her isolation.

For Aya, MPNH was “*el punto de partida* (a point of departure) to try new things, to be more comfortable with people,” she explains. “It took me out of my depression, the loneliness I felt. Now I feel useful, I feel happy and I feel more connected.”

Aya is not the only person in Vancouver who has struggled with loneliness. According to the Vancouver Foundation, one third of people in our city find it difficult to make friends. For people living in our country for 5 years or less, 42% count 3 people or fewer in their network of close friends. That's why MPNH programs like the Multicultural Cooking Club are such an important part of fostering social networks, relieving isolation, and supporting the mental wellbeing of those who call this city home.

According to MPNH's recently released survey and report *It's Not Just About the Food: Exploring the Impact of Cooking Programs*, this social and mental health support is a common benefit shared by many participants in the cooking club and other nutrition programs like Food Skills for Families.

Beyond offering Mount Pleasant residents the opportunity to try new culinary tastes and techniques on a regular basis, these peer-led programs give members of this community a way to connect and build relationships based on something we all have in common—an appetite. The Neighbourhood House provides a “home away from home” for speakers of more than 40 first languages. The research findings of the MPNH leadership team show just how important food is when it comes to creating a place where people feel connected, accepted, and welcomed.

The basis of MPNH's food programs is the teaching and preparation of healthy and nutritious meals. But because they involve participation in a shared common activity, these programs also feed new social networks. As one

mother in the Food Skills for Families program puts it, “we built friendships and we are all very close, thanks to the cooking class. We call each other, [and say] ‘Hey, let's go out for dinner.’”

This sense of connection is especially helpful for newcomers struggling to meet new people while mastering a second language. Of people surveyed in this report, nearly 78% state that the food programs have helped them improve their English language skills, crediting the “practical, hands-on training” they receive from instructors and peer-leaders in the program.

In fact, peer leadership plays a major role in the success of MPNH's food programs. With numerous opportunities to take active roles in the workshops, many people who begin as participants soon develop the confidence to take on facilitator positions. One woman told interviewers that “the program helps me by seeing other immigrants tak[e] charge and shar[e] despite their language skills are not as good as mine. I am now more engaged and I have two or three volunteer opportunities.”

Among those surveyed, 88% reported that they had mentored or otherwise supported someone in learning new skills, with 68% actually facilitating and leading a class. Others mentioned finding new career opportunities as a direct result of their involvement in the food program—both in terms of building food industry connections, and by gaining paid employment.

New opportunities to meet people and make friends paired with increased confidence with language and cooking skills create the perfect recipe for better, long lasting mental health. As another immigrant woman explains, this community, like a meal, is easy to share: “Talking to [other participants] during meal prep and eating food helped me to be more confident,” she says. “I am not in as bad a spot—I can help others.”

A long-term food program participant sums up how the food programs give him the freedom to be himself: “You feel like you are home, you can ask questions, you don't feel judged.”

MPNH's food programs are just one way to get involved in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of yourself and your neighbours. Please visit our programs page to find other ways that you can make your mark in your community.

—Liz Goode

*A pseudonym. All participants surveyed remained anonymous.