

Ecumenical Faith in an Artistic Community

AL THORLEIFSON

Photo: Al Thorleifson

When I first came to the Manitou area a half century ago, I was immediately aware that this was an ecumenical community, a community where people of different faith traditions worked together for the betterment of the whole community. There was no specific event which led to this interfaith perspective that I have been aware of, but it is seen in many aspects of community life. Much of the evidence of this partnership can be seen in the Manitou Opera House, a 1930 proscenium theatre built in the style of the Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris. This is where the faith communities come together.

Every year, the community's Ministerial Committee hosts a community Christmas Concert where choirs and readers from all six of the community's congregations, along with school and community choirs, perform and tell the Christmas story.

The community gathers annually on November 11 to recognize the sacrifice of the young men and women who have served in the armed forces since the community was founded in the 1880s. Again, representatives of the community's congregations serve as readers along with the Legion Chaplain.

Every summer, the Manitou Agricultural Fair includes a Sunday service focused on the land,

the crops and the sense of community associated with the agricultural way of life. Again, the churches are all involved.

Over the past thirty years, The Manitou Coffee House Musicians have hosted bi-weekly coffee houses where the musicians provide the music gratis and community organizations provide snacks and coffee. All donations received at these coffee houses go toward projects as varied as the Nursery School, the United Church Rock Lake Camp, and the Canadian Food Grains Bank. Music at these coffee houses is wide ranging, from folk to rock, from country to blues, and with a good measure of gospel and contemporary Christian influence. Everyone is welcome and their gift of music is respected by their fellow musicians and audience.

The Borderline Singers presented concerts of sacred and secular music for over 30 years. Candlewick, a local theatre company, has written scripts with biblical themes and performed them in two-week mid-summer productions. Performers in these productions come from the wider region of Southern Manitoba and again represent many faith communities. These are produced from and performed in the Manitou Opera House.

All these productions and performances with their sacred elements are interwoven

among many other more secular performances and productions. The Opera House has a much broader scope than this, however. Several teachers – piano, voice, violin, and dance teachers – host lessons out of the Opera House. A Youth Drop-in is hosted in the Opera House every week and provides a safe gathering place where young folk can talk, celebrate, do homework, and play together. Several church related groups have also occasionally held training sessions and workshops which are open to the community.

The Opera House is in use for at least 225 days of the year. And, of course, all of this was before COVID came along. The Opera House has been empty and silent since March of 2020, except for the occasional socially distanced meeting or a walk through to ensure the building is secure and the heat is still on. In February of 2022, as things have begun to open again, the junior drama troupe began rehearsing for a production of Lion King Junior. The teen crowd also began rehearsing for a production of Little Women. The elementary school choir videotaped their festival performances in the Opera House in mid-March, and because many of the young choristers have never been in the Opera House before, we took them on a tour of the building.

Here is another thing to note. The original Opera House was built without consideration of

those with mobility issues. For years, wheelchairs were carried into and out of the building, up the flight of stairs to the front door. In 2015, The Manitou Opera House Foundation decided to add an accessible wing to the building, with access to washrooms, the stage, and meeting rooms for all. The committee also decided to make the addition look and feel as much like the original as possible, so wide fir baseboards, hardwood floors, and a drop siding exterior was incorporated to invite everyone into this community space.

Many of our community's churches are small enough that funerals are now held in the newly accessible Opera House. One of our Opera House supporters even hosted his own 100th birthday party there.

Manitou is a musical community, a community where the arts are respected and promoted, where the young are encouraged to develop their artistic skills. It is also a faith community, where everyone is welcome, and everyone is encouraged to share their story. The church communities of Manitou, and the Opera House would welcome everyone to come join in celebrating faith and the arts, even at the same time.



Al Thorleifson taught senior high Math, Literature, Calculus and Choral Music for almost four decades at Nellie McClung Collegiate in Manitou. He became a lay reader in the Pembina Hills Parishes in the early 1990s and was ordained in 2015. He is also the archivist for the Pembina Manitou Archive, a digital archive which serves South Central Manitoba. Al and Loretta have sung together with friends, Bill and Mariette Howatt, in On the Edge at concerts throughout Southern Manitoba for over 30 years.

A LONG STANDING TRADITION

The Only Funeral Home Owned and Operated by the Bardal Family

Call: (204) 949-2200
neilbardalinc.com
info@nbardal.mb.ca

One Winnipeg Location Only
Across from Brookside Cemetery

3030 Notre Dame Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3H 1B9