

In the fabric of who we are: saint benedict's table supports their community through the artist-in-residence program

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Photo: Brian Wangerheim

For twelve years, saint benedict's table has supported its community of artists through an artist-in-residence program. st. ben's is a downtown Winnipeg parish, sharing space with All Saints Anglican Church at the corner of Memorial and Broadway. They meet for their regular Eucharist service on Sunday evenings, and as such have an eclectic collection of members, including several artists from different disciplines. They have supported different artists from the congregation through their artist-in-residence program over the past twelve years.

In that time, they have supported fifteen artists (both career artists and hobbyists) from different disciplines like musicians, writers, potters, photographers, and visual artists, including Carolyn Mount (fabric arts), [Kalyn Falk](#) (creative prayer), Anas Quinten (visual art and calligraphy) and myself (creative writing and theatre).

"We knew right from the beginning that music was going to be a really important part in our life," st. ben's rector [Jamie Howison](#) says, adding that over time they discovered they had multiple artists from other disciplines in the church. "By virtue of who was there, we said let's incorporate the things that people bring into the life of the church as best we can."

The artist-in-residence program began "by happy accident" in 2010, Howison says, when the church supported musician [Gord Johnson](#) over several months with a small stipend each month.

After Johnson's residency wrapped up in 2013, st. ben's, having already made space in the budget for the program, made the residency an annual program. The plan was to support an artist from the community over one year (in line with the liturgical calendar) with a stipend. Each year, the artist (or artists) is selected by a group of applicants by the Arts Fund committee.

Most of these artists included community interaction in their residency. Falk offered workshops in body prayer, which formed the research for her book. Carolyn Mount founded the artist network, a group where st. ben's artists can meet and share in each others' artistic journeys. I presented several readings of my work, with the help of local actors, over my terms.

In 2018, the residency became more flexible. Applicants could request a term of several months for a specific project. That year the church supported [Kevin Grummett](#), a photographer, Anas Quinten, a calligrapher and



**Work by Anas Quinten,
a calligrapher and visual artist**

visual artist, Kyla Neufeld, poet and former editor of Rupert's Land News who wrote liturgically inspired poems, and [Trish Vrolijk](#), who often serves as a musician but used the time to make a new quilt for the St. Ben's family service. As well, [Karen Cornelius](#) was supported in her climate-based work. Karen Cornelius offered one community workshop, and another artist-in-residence from that year, [Andrea Shalay](#), centred her residency on offering several workshops on making [pysanka](#), a traditional folk-art practice of decorating Easter eggs.



An icon created by visual artist Anas Quinten.

In my own case, the monetary support was hugely important for me that year.

"For some of the people who receive these residencies it's not an income stream that they are all dependent on. It's been gravy. On the other hand, there have been other people for whom it has made an enormous difference, month to month. For somebody who's trying to be a working artist and use that as their primary vocation, as you well know, it can be a bit of a hand to mouth existence," Howison says.

One of 2022's artists-in-residence is [Mark Holmes á Court](#), a composer with a background in classical music, who was able to use his residency to write a new song for the liturgy.

"I just finished a master's program in composition and this counts, for me, as a kind of commission," he says. "It's not that I wouldn't write work for churches without being paid, but without payment it is hard to justify prioritizing it and getting the work done."

In 2018-19, St. Ben's was working off of a grant from the [Collegeville Institute](#) as a part of their [Communities of Calling](#) with a focus on vocation of the church. That year, the artist-in-residence was replaced by a "weaver's apprentice" to lead the work on a community art project: a large woven art piece. Under the tutelage of Carolyn Mount, [Samantha Klassen](#) was picked to use a large loom during the regular services, to weave for herself and to teach and work with members of the church to participate in the process as well.



A loom housed at saint benedict's table as part of the artists-in-residence program.

Moving into 2020, the Arts Fund decided to begin the residency in January, splitting the year between two artists: [Lois Gillespie](#), a musician (nine months) and myself (three months). 2020, as you may recall, was a year of grief and pivoting. Gillespie intended to lead some songwriting workshops in person, as well as a few concerts, and to write a number of songs. I intended to work on research for a new play about historical abuse in disability institutions. Due to the lockdown, Lois had to postpone her songwriting workshop and the ongoing condition of the world made reading about

abuse difficult. With the permission of the Arts Fund, I was able to use the time to work on other projects, while also hosting a virtual reading of one of my plays.

This year, the church is supporting four artists over three-month terms. The residency will support returning artists, Kevin Grummett, to work on a photography exhibit, and Trish Vrolijk to professionally record the original song “Still,” based on Psalms 27, 116, and 139. [Sharon Jones-Ryan](#) will be working in pottery to create a series of single serving communion bowls to be gifted to members of the online worship community of st. ben’s. The residency will also support writer [Jennifer Wiens](#) to focus on writing, including a writing retreat. Another clay artist, [Anna Goertzen Loeppky](#), will be leading the community in making communion cups.



**Pottery for communion
created by Sharon Jones-Ryan**

Mark Holmes á Court debuted his composition at the 2022 Good Friday service. The composition, split into four parts, was played by clarinet, viola, and piano and is split into four parts.

“The first piece is a reflection on ‘Father,

forgive them, they know not what they do.’ The music is more meditative and slow, maybe a little hesitant,” Holmes á Court says. “The second is an emphatic cry, which is much more rhythmically driven. The clarinet goes high, as is the viola, and they bounce off each other.”

While the residency has funded a number of art projects and workshops for the liturgy or community of st. ben’s, the development of an artist’s personal practice outside of a faith context has always been supported by the Arts Fund committee. Over my terms in 2017 and 2021, I worked on a number of writing projects, including novels and plays, which were not faith-based. The Arts Fund was also very understanding of my need to pivot the focus of my residency last year when it became too difficult to pursue under the emotional strain of the pandemic. The Arts Fund board emphasizes that successful residency isn’t about output as much as supporting the artist’s time and development.

Howison says that the artists-in-residence don’t need to “paste in a footnote” in order to make their art acceptable by the fund or the church at large.

“I think that it’s important in the life of the church to include artists. Just in the fabric of who and what we are, I think that as a writer or visual artist or musician, you as a person bring something to the community that matters,”

Howison says. “The flip side, we also know that while some people like Gord are steadily writing music for the liturgy, other people like Lois (Gillespie) are not. But that’s okay. That’s okay because what you do matters and it’s part of who you are, and we want to be authentic.”



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