

# Paws & Pray service welcomes dogs to church

## Parishioners and pets enjoy community and communion at Beaconsfield chapel

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A Beaconsfield Anglican church has gone one better than offering simple pet blessings, and found a new and novel way to boost church attendance in today's increasingly secular society.

Christ Church Beaurepaire offers a full communion service to which pet owners are invited to bring their dogs. The monthly church service, known as Paws & Pray, is held on the first Sunday of each month, the next one being April 7.

Like other communion services held at the 90-year-old stone worship house on Church St. in Beaconsfield, the 45-minute service follows the Anglican Book of Alternative Services and includes hymns, Gospel readings and a collection.

But, there the similarity ends.

At this service, hymns sung are about "the shaggy dog alone and stray," dog treats, not just hosts are passed out during communion, and canines of every description fill the pews.

"My gosh, it has really taken off," said Michael Johnson, Christ Church Beaurepaire's archdeacon. "This group has become a whole new worshipping community of our church."

Johnson said a core group of 20 to 30 families — and their dogs — are now attending the service regularly, and every month, there are new faces in the church crowd.

"It's just so much fun," said church secretary Sandy Temple, who brings her two dogs, Miles, a Labrador-Husky mix and Toby, a 13-year-old Golden Retriever, to church.

"When we go up to the altar, it's nose-to-tail all the way up the aisle," said Temple.

Johnson said the idea was first suggested back in 2009 by Johanne Tassé, a parishioner at the church who also runs a Quebec animal welfare agency.

The head of Centre d'adoption de compagnie du Québec, Tassé had learned about a similar service being offered by a Boston-area church.

At the time, Johnson said, the church offered an annual blessing of the pets, but a service with dogs was something new and untried. The idea had to go before the church's parish council.

In 2009, he said, the parish council took the brave decision to approve the idea and, ever since, the service has been offered once a month, October through May.

Now, he said, the church — on the recommendation of

another parishioner — has launched a publicity campaign to attract new worshippers.

"(Louise Chenevert, one of our parishioners) felt we needed to make this available to more people," said Johnson. "Dogs (and cats) are increasingly viewed as a cherished member of the family."

Paws & Pray posters are going up on community bulletin boards at local veterinary clinics, pet supply stores and dog groomers to publicize the service.

Tassé said she thought from the start that it was a way to demonstrate "that dogs are a part of our family. And yes, they are part of our community."

But she said the whole exercise has turned out even better than she ever imagined possible.

Rather than rushing off after church, she said, many members of the congregation are staying on for coffee and then going outside together to walk their dogs and share stories.

Some rescue dogs are even finding new homes as a result of the service. Representatives of Rosie's Animal Adoption and Animatch take turns bringing in dogs that need to be adopted.

In more ways than one, she said, the service has fostered a greater fellowship between man and man's best friend.

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