WESLEY
COMMITTED TO COMMUNITY



DAVID B. HANNA
2004

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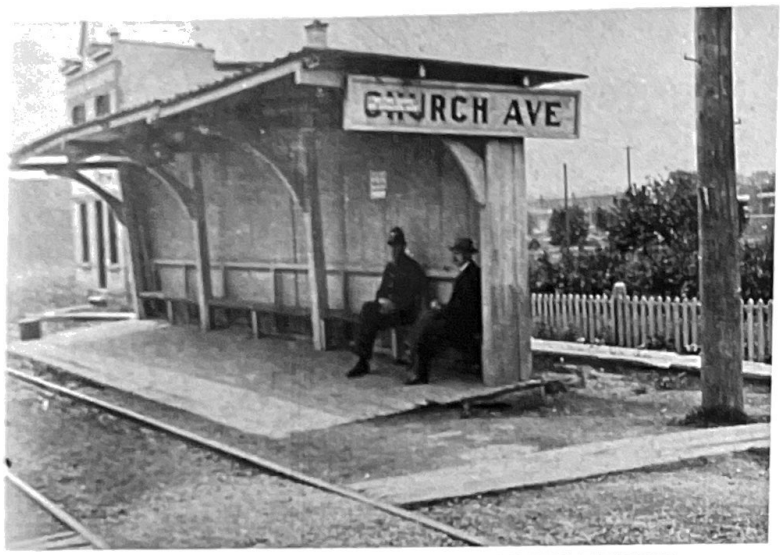
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A NEW SUBURB : NOTRE-DAME-DE-GRACE

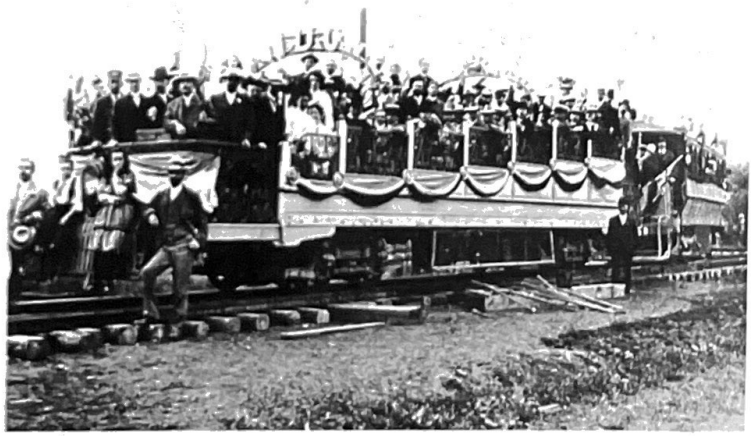
In 1900 Notre-Dame-de-Grâce was a rural village located on Montée Décarie between Côte-Saint-Antoine Road and Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Avenue, serving a prosperous agricultural area stretching westward to the little railway suburb of Montreal West. The area was famous for its Montreal melons, but also had many apple orchards and grew other crops as well. The soils were rich and the farms prosperous.



MP&I TRAM STOP ON GIROUARD AT CHURCH AVENUE (N.D.G.AVE) ABOUT 1912

By 1898, the Montreal, Park and Island Railway had built a rural tram line up Girouard to Queen Mary Road, where it joined other rural lines at Snowdon Junction. Suburban development began creeping across the farmlands and in 1905 the town of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce was incorporated.

In 1910, the village and its rural territory were annexed by the City of Montreal, paving the way for urban development with money available for streets, sidewalks, water and sewer pipes. Families poured out of the older downtown neighbourhoods especially from the area between St. Lawrence Boulevard and Atwater Avenue. NDG featured wider streets, new semi-detached homes of duplex or single-family configuration, tree-lined sidewalks, bigger lawns and rear gardens, sometimes even a garage.



INAUGURATION OF STREETCAR SERVICE ON SHERBROOKE ST. 1908

(PHOTOS COURTESY OF STM)

Along with the arrival of these new suburbanites came the need for places of worship. French Roman Catholics were well served by the already well-established Eglise Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, but English families of whatever religious persuasion had to found new churches. Thus came into being Kensington Presbyterian Church at Godfrey and Kensington, Saint Columba Anglican Church, originally on Grand near Sherbrooke, and eventually St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church in the early years of the century. Methodists too were beginning to organize.

FORMING THE WESLEY CONGREGATION: 1913-1917

In January 1913, a group of Methodists headed up by the Rath, Reid, Martin and Lee families asked their minister at Westmount Methodist Church for assistance in opening up a mission in NDG. Rev. W. E. Baker agreed to the request and the first prayer meeting was held at the home of W.J. Rath at 70 Draper Avenue, continuing every Thursday evening. Montreal Conference was approached with an eye to opening up a new charge.

On July 12, 1913, the first Wesley Church service was held at the home of Stewart McConnell at 307 Clifton Avenue (now #2353). With membership reaching 18, a tent was obtained and erected at the northwest corner of Sherbrooke and Melrose on land borrowed from a church member. Under the auspices of newly appointed student minister A. S. Doggett, the tent served through the late summer and early autumn until October when a storm blew it away during the night. The small congregation then met for their Sunday services in the Melrose Hardware Store, owned by J. B. Staton, a member.

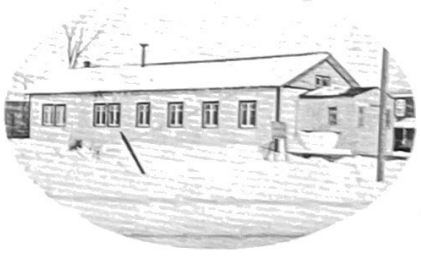


FIRST MEETING PLACE
OF WESLEY CHURCH

Realizing that Wesley's situation was desperate given the onset of winter, the Extension Board of the Methodist Church lent the congregation a portable wooden building. Arriving in sections on the same property at the northwest corner of Sherbrooke and Melrose, George Homer, a superintendent of the Steel Company of Canada arranged his holidays so that he could supervise the erection of the portable church in time for Sunday services. Everything was ready, and a worship service was held on November 23. On December 1, 1913, the name of Wesley Methodist Church was officially chosen.

Winter was difficult in the small temporary church, with no running water, very cramped quarters, hot seats by the stove and cold seats near the walls. Stewart McConnell was the first superintendent of Wesley and together with his family did much to build up an impressive Sunday School in the early years. He died in 1918 and a plaque in the current sanctuary commemorates the work of this pioneer.

Winter gave way to spring, however, and in June, R. W. Armstrong, a new student minister was welcomed. By the fall of 1914, the Official Board launched a financial campaign to secure property for a permanent building. The congregation raised $2,360 and land was purchased at the northwest corner of Draper Avenue and Côte-Saint-Antoine Road. The cost of the land, however, was about $5,000. R. J. Rath, first treasurer of Wesley, pledged the remainder as a loan.



PORTABLE CHURCH, ERECTED
NOVEMBER 1913

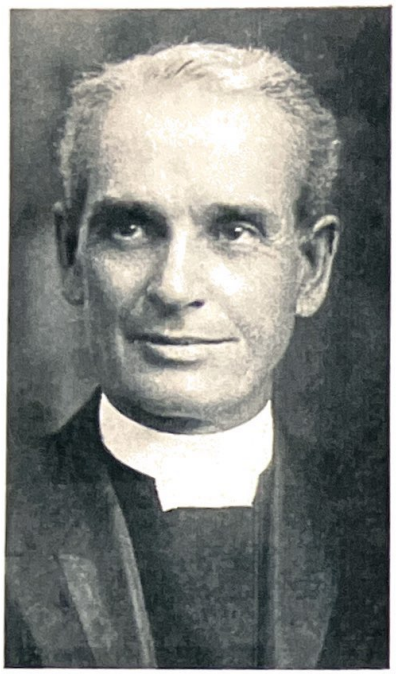
The Great War broke out in 1914 and 13 young members of Wesley answered the call. All but two returned. Samuel L. Robinson and Stanley Black are inscribed on a memorial plaque in the sanctuary along with the others. In 1915, the Rev. F. J. McClement, Wesley's first ordained minister, arrived. By 1916, the church had 119 members on its rolls. Soon it would be time to build.



SUNDAY SCHOOL
PICNIC, 1916.

BUILDING A FIRST PERMANENT HOME FOR WESLEY: 1918-1925

In 1918, the Rev. Dr. Robert Smith was called to Wesley. He was much loved by his congregation and stayed until 1924, the end of his career, having overseen a very dynamic period. He was known for his extraordinary pastoral abilities. In fact, his pastorate was a family affair, as his wife served as president of the Ladies' Aid, and his three sons were variously president of the Young People's Society, steward and elder of the church. He retained his connection with Wesley until his death in the 1950s.



REV. DR. ROBERT SMITH. PASTOR FROM 1918 UNTIL HIS RETIREMENT FROM THE MINISTRY IN 1924.

The year 1918 was when the new Sunday School building was built on the land acquired on Draper. The two-storey brick building was designed to house all the Sunday School classes and the church hall. Temporarily, of course, the church hall was used for worship until such time as a sanctuary could be afforded. The front of the property at the corner was left vacant to accommodate the future sanctuary. Meanwhile, the portable church was dismantled and shipped off to the next recipient, a group of Methodists forming a congregation at the outer suburban tram stop at East Greenfield in Saint-Hubert. Amazingly it still stands today.

The building project, so far, had been made possible through the gift of $9,000 from downtown Dominion Methodist Church, which was closing, a mortgage of $10,000 plus funds raised from the congregation. When opened in March 1919, 65 children were enrolled in the Sunday School, testimony to McConnell's work. This building, though no longer used by Wesley, still exists virtually intact at the same location, complete with its vacant lot at the front.

In 1924, the legendary Rev. B. B. Brown was called to Wesley. His enormous portrait still hangs in Wesley Church, testimony to his amazing pastorate. He served for a quarter century which was marked by Church Union, phenomenal population growth in NDG, the terrible economic depression and a harrowing World War.



SUNDAY SCHOOL BUILDING ON DRAPER AVE.

Church Union between the Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists across Canada did indeed occur in 1925. Wesley Methodist Church was renamed Wesley United Church. In fact, many Presbyterian Churches opted not to join the union, neighbouring Kensington church being one of them. Many Presbyterians felt, however, that Church Union was the way to go, and a large number of Kensington members left to join Wesley at that time.

The arrival of the Presbyterians, coupled with the soaring growth in membership due to rapid development of housing in NDG during the 1920s, caused Wesley to rethink its building plans. For one thing, the Sunday School building was already too small and in 1927 a vacant store at Sherbrooke and Hampton had to be rented to take in the overflow. For another, the space left on the lot to accommodate the sanctuary was now hopelessly inadequate for such a building. The only solution was to find some new property and build an all-new church complex.

BUILDING THE DEFINITIVE WESLEY CHURCH: 1926-1931

Wesley United Church moved swiftly. New property was purchased in January 1926 at the southwest corner of NDG Avenue and Royal Avenue to accommodate the new church complex. Plans were drawn up in February by the prestigious firm of Hutchison & Wood, architects, for separate sanctuary and Sunday School buildings joined at the rear in a U-shaped plan. A monument in the Arts and Crafts style, its interior is modelled on the early Christian basilican design typical of Italian churches in the sixth to ninth centuries.

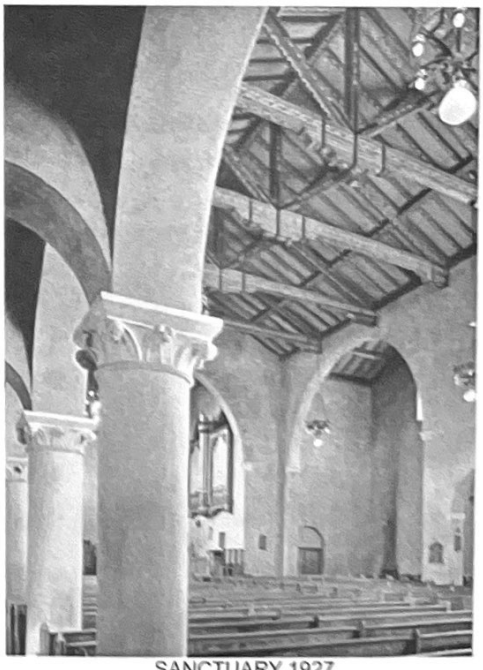


SIDE VIEW OF WESLEY CHURCH. SHOWING ROYAL AVE. ENTRANCE AND VIEW OF TOWER.

With a $25,000 grant from Montreal Presbytery, a $70,000 mortgage and pledges from the congregation, the sanctuary portion of the project was begun in May 1926 and opened in January 1927. The service on January 23 was broadcast on radio, quite a novelty then. With 1,012 members in 1927, Wesley held a morning service as well as an evening service each Sunday. An extraordinary additional gift of $25,000 was given by Douglas Methodist Church, which was closing at the time. Part of the value of this gift came in the form of a magnificent Casavant pipe organ which originally cost $6,500 in 1904.

When Wesley opened, its architectural style and approach was a departure from the norm in Montreal. Roman Catholic churches in the 1920s tended to be monumental stone buildings in elaborate 11th or 12th century Romanesque or later Baroque styles inspired from Italian models. Most Protestant churches of the time continued to follow the still-popular decorated English Gothic style. Dominion-Douglas and Westmount Park United followed this pattern, as did several Anglican churches like St. Matthias, and English Catholic ones, such as the Church of the Ascension in Westmount. Other Anglican churches went a different way, modelling themselves on small medieval English parish churches, for example St.Philip's in Montreal West.

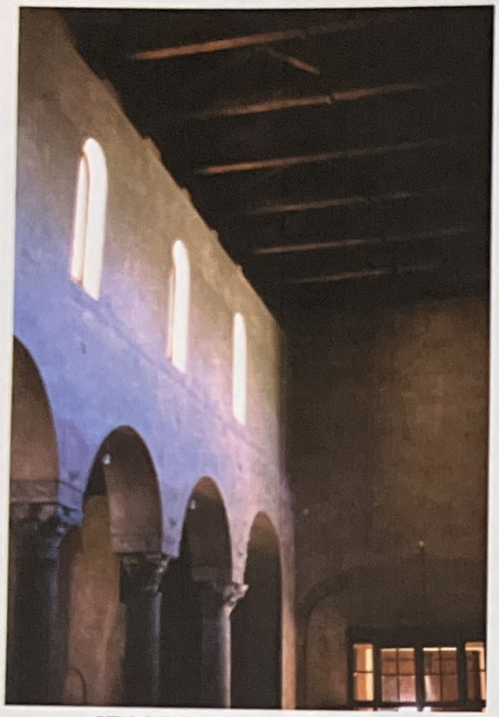
Few Québec churches were in the Arts and Crafts style, Maisonneuve Presbyterian and Valois United being notable exceptions. Wesley, however, was a unique monumentally-scaled Arts and Crafts church inspired by the then current American styles with the typical side tower plan. Inside, the nave followed the model of a plain early Romanesque sanctuary, much like the early Christian basilican type church at Paestum in Italy, obviously much plainer than the later more florid examples found in Florence (San Miniato), and Ravenna (St. Apollonary).



SANCTUARY 1927

Despite its monumental size and large square tower, Wesley manages to fit right into the neighbourhood amidst the two-storey Arts and Crafts style brick houses surrounding it. This is accomplished by the use of dark polychromatic rustic bricks on the outside of the building and the generous use of trees and ivy to camouflage the size of the church. Like the rest of the neighbourhood, the church seems to blend in with the natural landscape.

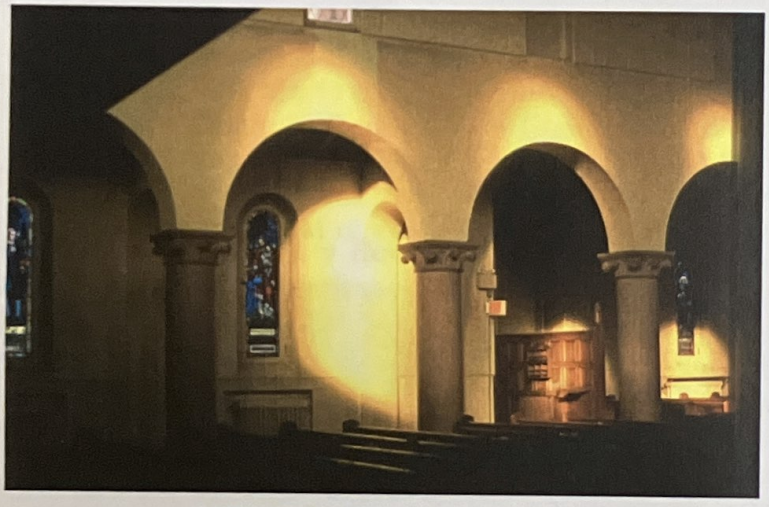
Accents are kept to a minimum and are executed in Indiana limestone. Notable among them is the string course across the facade featuring the English rose, the Scottish thistle and the Irish shamrock in Arts & Crafts styling. Above is a medallion with the Holy Spirit represented by a dove. The church's simplicity and perfect proportions are the hallmarks of its success as an architectural monument. It was a return to traditional Protestant church simplicity after several decades of Victorian Gothic churches such as St. James United.



6TH CENTURY CHURCH AT
PAESTUM, ITALY

The cavernous sanctuary is stark in its simplicity. The stucco walls were originally coloured orange-ochre and the side aisles were burnt umber in the Arts & Crafts taste. The nave follows the Latin cross plan with transepts. The roof is held up by huge triangular wooden trusses, delicately decorated in a wide variety of Arts and Crafts motifs, each one unique. Arches are supported by heavy Romanesque columns. The monumental arch to the chancel originally carried the inscription: "Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness" intertwined with a leafy vine pattern, in typical Arts & Crafts calligraphy. The processional aisle and the chancel floor are laid in alternating coloured tiles, much in the fashion of St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

The chancel itself and the east transept feature rose windows. All other windows are narrow and round-arched in the Romanesque tradition, all originally glazed in leaded diamond glass. A large gallery sits over the narthex at the other end of the nave. Seating was provided for 1,000 people with plain oak pews in the gallery, the nave and the transepts. The raised chancel contains choir pews arranged in an amphitheater fashion behind the organ console. A lectern sits to the right and the pulpit to the left, all in oak. Six monumental Arts & Crafts style wrought-iron chandeliers were suspended from the trusses, with two lesser ones in the chancel (since removed).



ROMANESQUE COLUMNS & ARCHES.
WESLEY 1997

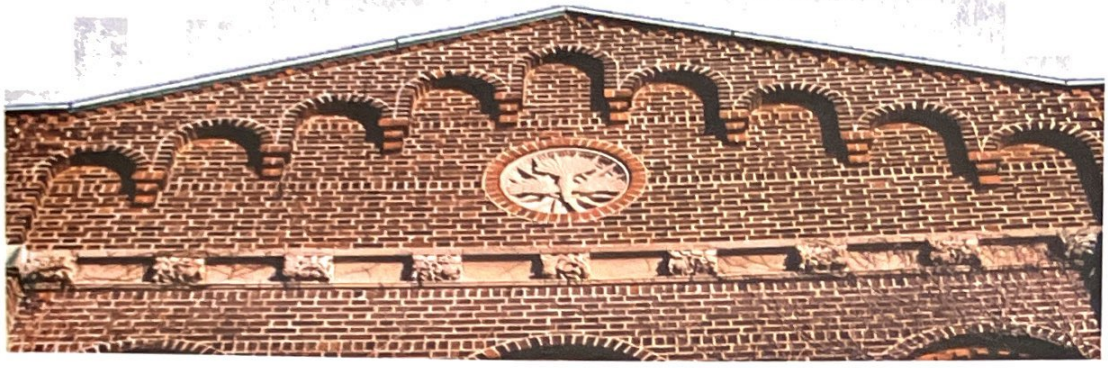
Next to the Royal Avenue side entrance is a small stairway leading up to a large room in the tower. Above it is an empty belfry. To the left of the chancel are the minister's vestry and the stewards' office, containing a massive oak table, cabinetry and a fireplace. To the right of the chancel sits the choir vestry with its Arts and Crafts fireplace and concrete beamed ceiling (now used as the parlour). Next to the sanctuary, in the hallway to the Sunday School building, is the iron stairwell with marble steps leading up to the minister's office and secretary's antechamber, the organ pipe room and the original caretaker's apartment.



CHIESA SAN MINIATO, FLORENCE ITALY

Beneath the sanctuary, in a partially excavated basement, is the church hall, complete with stage for putting on theatrical performances. This room doubled as a gymnasium for the young people. Off the hall are two meeting rooms, a large kitchen and two bathrooms. The rest of the basement was left unexcavated.

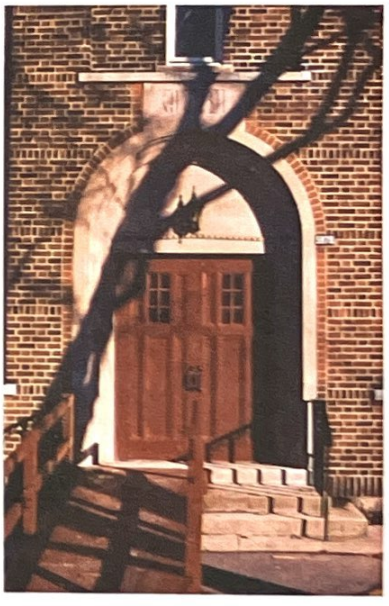
In 1931, the Sunday School building was added, plans being drawn up, once again, by Hutchison & Wood. It featured its own entrance to the street with brick-red coloured Arts and Crafts double doors, just like the rest of the complex. The building featured smaller Romanesque windows throughout, two small rose windows



HOLY SPIRIT DOVE MEDALLION ABOVE ROSE, THISTLE AND SHAMROCK STRING COURSE

on the façade and another at the rear. Romanesque detailing was replicated from the adjacent sanctuary. The roof was arranged in a clerestory fashion to allow natural lighting into the upstairs halls.

Inside, on the main floor, was a huge church hall, with a large stage framed in cranberry velvet curtains with gold tassels so that theatrical productions could be created. Behind the stage, at the rear of the building, was the ladies' parlour (later board room), with its own Arts and Crafts fireplace and large concrete beamed ceiling.



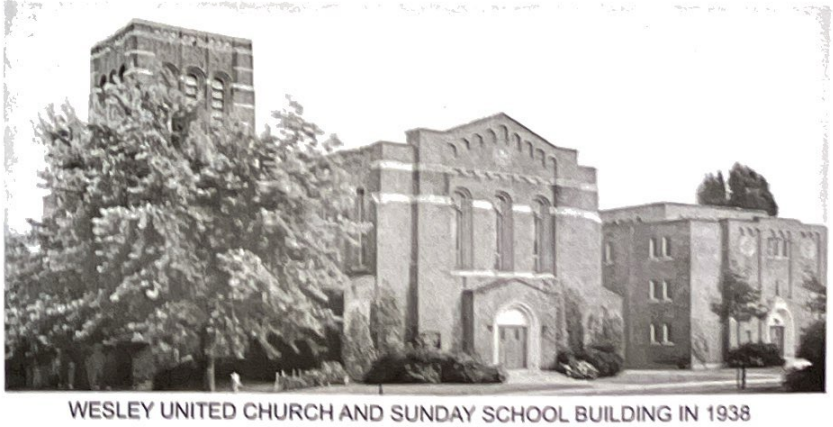
ARTS & CRAFTS DOORWAY TO SUNDAY SCHOOL BUILDING

Although this building could be accessed by the existing main central stairwell, it had its own twin stairways at the front of the building as well. These led to two bathrooms and a projection room halfway up. Through a hole in the wall, a large projector projected light in many colours on the stage and films were projected as well. At the top of the two stairwells were the Sunday School halls.

Hall B, at the front of the building, was the larger of the two and was used by the older children. Hall A, at the rear, was for the smaller children. Flanking the clerestory halls on both sides were 17 small classrooms with lower ceilings. At the front, between the stairwells, was the Sunday School superintendent's office.

The basement offered a larger caretaker's apartment at the rear under the ladies' parlour, allowing the former apartment to be remade into two more children's classrooms. Under the church hall, was a huge room with 10 foot ceilings designed for possible use as bowling alleys. Nothing was ever done with this space, however, and a lazy caretaker in later years filled it up with coal clinker instead of taking it out to the side lane for municipal disposal. Finally, a second smaller kitchen was tucked in between the ladies' parlour and the choir vestry at the rear.

When the Sunday School building was ready in 1931, a grand procession of children paraded from the Draper Avenue building up to the new building on NDG Avenue. It had cost $72,000, but seeing those hundreds of children parading seemed to make the expense well worth it. The entire property was valued at $220,000 with a total debt of $105,000 remaining to be repaid as of 1931.



WESLEY UNITED CHURCH AND SUNDAY SCHOOL BUILDING IN 1938

ARCHITECTURAL SPECIFICATIONS FOR WESLEY CHURCH

The organ was built in 1904 by Casavant Frères in St-Hyacinthe, Québec, for Douglas Methodist Church. It is organ number 224 in their records. It has 2,206 pipes contained in a room behind the false pipes visible in the sanctuary. These pipes range from a 16 ft. double diapason, made of pine, down to small tin pipes just a few inches long. The system works electro-pneumatically, with air blown into the pipes from a bellows powered by an electric blower.

The organ has 36 stops, which allow the organist to select the various tones and combinations of pipes he wishes to use. The instrument is very complex, requiring annual tuning, but is of very high quality. According to the manufacturer, still in business, such an instrument would cost over half a million dollars today.



TOWER: RUSTIC BRICK & INDIANA LIMESTONE



POLYCHROMATIC RUSTIC BRICK, RED PRESSED BRICK AROUND THE WINDOWS, BENEDICT STONE TRACERY IN WINDOWS, AND INDIANA LIMESTONE TRIM.

The buildings are reinforced concrete structures with concrete floors and steel beams over the arches in the nave. The facing brick on the outside is "multi-colored Rustic brick" laid in Flemish bond, while "plain red pressed bricks" and "splayed red pressed brick number 23",all made by the National Brick Company, are used architecturally around the windows. Backing bricks are "Laprairie plastic bricks" manufactured by the Laprairie Brick Company. Interior walls are made of "hard burned terra-cotta" made by the Montreal Terra Cotta Company. The roofing is of copper or asphalt as required.

The window sills and doorsteps at the entranceways, the tracery at the top of the tower and facade ornaments are all in Indiana limestone. In fact a wealth of ancient sea fossils are clearly visible in the stone, especially at the sanctuary entrance. These probably date from 450 million years ago. The window tracery in the rose windows and the tracery in the three front nave windows are of Benedict Stone.

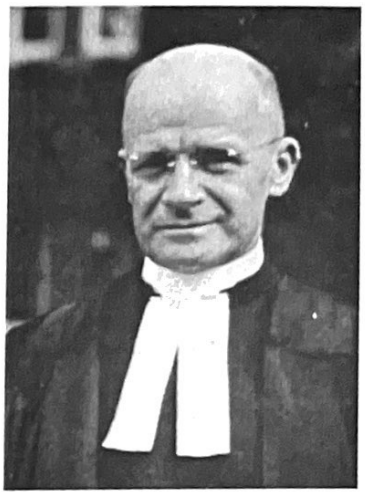
Inside the sanctuary, the huge roof trusses are of B.C. fir, held together with wrought-iron bands. The cranberry-coloured panels set between the rafters and purlins are of a material called "Celotex building board". All windows were specified to be leaded glass on the outside and clear glass on the inside. All furnishings are made of red oak. Interior doors are red oak veneered slab doors with "Gothic black iron straps". The capitals on the columns are of Benedict stone.

The central stairwell in the building is made of iron and laid with grey Missisquoi marble steps with iron newel posts and brass caps. Walls in the building are finished with two coats of "Rocalite plaster" made by Alex Bremner & Co., finished off with a hand float to give it a sandy finish.

The chancel steps are also grey Missisquoi marble, with black Canadian marble edging. The chancel floor, centre aisle and narthex are laid with black and gray Linotiles with black border made by the Dominion Oil Cloth & Linoleum Company. Throughout the rest of the building the floors are laid with rolled "AA Brown Battleship Linoleum" made by the same company. Washrooms have white marble partitions throughout. Kitchen cupboards are made of pine with leaded glass doors (since removed).

THE SURPRISING DYNAMISM OF THE DEPRESSION: 1932-1938

The Rev. B. B. Brown, brought his congregation through the difficult Depression years of the 1930s by constant hard work and organizational genius. He was a warm and friendly pastor and an indefatigable visitor. He made a point of seeking out new residents in the community, checked up on lapsed members and visited sick and troubled people.

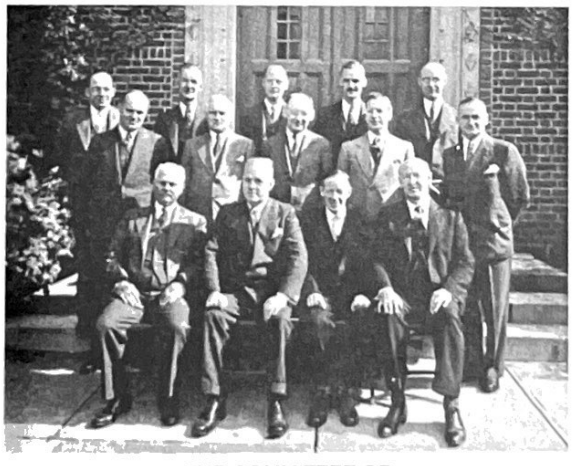


REV. B.B. BROWN,

The times were difficult and he was constantly out in the community visiting and encouraging people. From 1932 to 1936 a monthly church magazine was even published featuring Wesley news and world mission work. He not only held the congregation together, it flourished. The extraordinary work took its toll, however, and early in 1935 he suffered a collapse from sheer exhaustion. The grateful congregation paid to send him to Jamaica for rest and recovery, and hired the Rev. R. B. Hallett to act as an assistant minister. For the first time Wesley had two ministers.

There was little need to alter the building since it was so new, but a very beautiful addition to the sanctuary was made in 1937. Janet Ross Patterson commissioned an exquisitely carved Arts & Crafts style screen made in oak for the back wall of the chancel. It fit in perfectly with the design of the church.

By 1938, with 2,200 members in the congregation, Wesley's strength was evident in the impressive number of groups formed within the church. There was the traditional Official Board structure, with its trustees, stewards and elders, in turn with its committees devoted to property, allocations and pastor's advisory. These were all run by men, as was typical of the time, although the 66-member Board did include two women who were presidents of the major women's groups. Wesley innovated by forming a Junior Board training young people for future work on the Official Board. This group of 45 people, including six young women, had the right to make recommendations to the Board.



THE COMMITTEE OF STEWARDS 1938



THE JUNIOR BOARD 1938

The real role of women in church society at the time was in fundraising and outreach work, or as it was then called "mission work". The Ladies Aid Society was formed at the outset in 1913 to raise funds for the church. It was renamed the Women's Association in 1927 and was responsible for raising the funds to install the new pipe organ.

The Woman's Missionary Society formed in 1915, was by far the largest group and raised funds for outreach work. The Wesley Mission Circle was formed in 1918 and renamed the Young Woman's Auxiliary in 1927. Yet another young woman's group, called the Servamus Missionary Auxiliary, was formed in 1933 with the goal of inviting speakers, performing plays, holding debates and raising

funds for outreach. The Chundra Lela Mission Circle was formed in 1931 for younger women to learn about the missionary spirit. Still younger, the Margaret Cameron Circle was formed for girls in 1938. The Mission Band, formed in 1930, was designed for children to hear missionary stories. Youngest of all was the Baby Band, formed in 1935, for small children.





ABOVE LEFT: THE WOMAN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY IN 1938

ABOVE RIGHT: CHUNDRA LELA MISSION CIRCLE 1938

RIGHT: MARY & ROBERT PLAY MARCH 23 1934



The young people were taken well in hand with the formation of the Epworth League in 1918, renamed the Young People's Society in 1926, featuring an agenda devoted to literary, social, religious and missionary issues. They were responsible for putting on many plays in the new Wesley hall. There was also a Young People's Discussion Group formed in 1935 for young adults interested in social and religious questions.

There were several other groups in the church, such as the Wesley Men's Club, formed in 1928 to raise funds for outreach work. The Badminton Club was formed in 1919 and the Carpet Bowling Club was formed in 1921. Of course, the Wesley Choir went back to the beginning in 1913.

The biggest organization by far at Wesley Church was the Sunday School. With a total enrollment of about a thousand children, at least half of whom could be expected to come on an ordinary Sunday, it was a major organizational feat to keep it all rolling. Young children attended in the morning while older children came at 3PM making double use of the facilities.



A PORTION OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL CHILDREN 1938

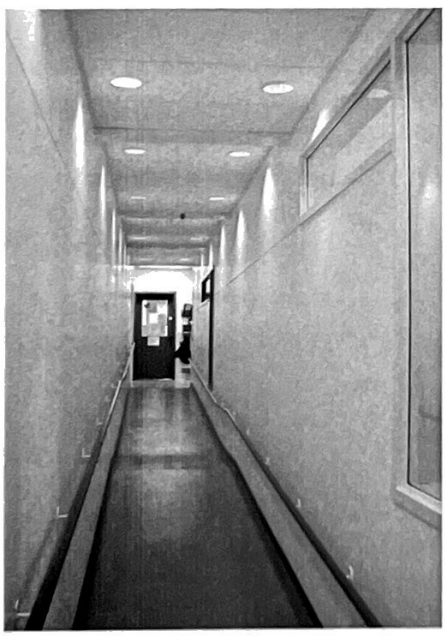
J. M. C. Duckworth, General Superintendent of the Sunday School from about 1932 to 1947, also happened to be secretary of the local YMCA. He was assisted by two associate superintendents and a secretary; with nearly 100 teachers, the Sunday School was a big operation. Classes began with the Cradle Roll, and went on through Beginners, Primary, Junior, Intermediate and Senior levels. There was even a Home Department for young shut-ins.



CANADIAN GIRLS IN TRAINING 1938

Also under the purview of the Sunday School was the C.G.I.T.(Canadian-Girls-in-Training), a midweek group for girls run by Mrs. Duckworth. Dressed in sailor suits, they were mostly concerned with community outreach. The Junior Choir likewise was under Sunday School management. The Wolf Cubs organization, run for boys, had a separate organization through the scouting movement.

With so many groups generating so much activity under its roofs, Wesley Church literally was the community. There can be no doubt that the new buildings, as large as they were, were filled to capacity during the 1930s. We owe much to Harry Lee who carefully recorded Wesley's history for the Silver Jubilee celebration of 1938.





Félicitations à l'église unie Wesley à l'occasion de l'ouverture du Centre communautaire Wesley.

Congratulations to Wesley United Church on the occasion of the opening of the Wesley Community Centre.

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WAR SACRIFICES AND RENOVATIONS: 1939-1948



MODERN LIGHTS, ACOUSTIC TILES AND PASTEL COLOURS

With the Silver Jubilee celebrations of 1938 barely over, war broke out the following year. This time, with so many members, Wesley could not help but be very involved. An astounding 460 members went off to war between 1939 and 1945, and sadly, 16 never came back. Their names are recorded in the East transept war memorial and the three stained-glass windows. They are especially remembered each year at Remembrance Day. Their sacrifice for their country, and indeed to the world, will hopefully never be forgotten.

One interesting outgrowth of the Silver Jubilee celebrations was the raising of $25,000 for renovation projects. Some decisions made on how to spend the money could only be judged, with hindsight, to be regrettable. It was ironic that an event celebrating Wesley's history and accomplishments should result in so much destruction of the sanctuary's beauty.

The one decision that did make good sense was the installation of a sound system in both the sanctuary and Wesley Hall. This allowed people to hear much better. More intriguingly, it allowed Wesley to hold only one Sunday service with a minister in each location, the service being broadcast in the hall and the sanctuary simultaneously. The modern age had arrived.

The more regrettable decisions revolved around renovations to the church building. It was decided that there was too much reverberation in the sanctuary and church hall for speakers to be heard clearly. The solution was to install acoustic tiles in both spaces. In the sanctuary this had the effect of putting a wet dishrag on the organ music. Sound tests performed in the 1990s revealed that whole ranges of sound from the organ were being absorbed into the wall tiles. Likewise singing was much dampened, though that probably was not a huge problem back in the 1940s with so many people.

Equally regrettable was the decision to remove the beautiful wrought-iron Arts and Crafts chandeliers from the sanctuary beams. The sanctuary was probably judged to be too dark at the time, but these beautiful works of art were needlessly sacrificed, probably carted off for melting down in the war effort. In their place, large functionalist boxes were screwed into the beams with enormous spotlights shining down on the congregation. The new lighting was still gloomy but worse it sadly rendered the beautiful stenciling on the beams virtually impossible to see.

The work of art that the sanctuary had been was unsympathetically repainted in pastel colours, which did not do justice to its design. Astoundingly, the beautiful inscription in the chancel arch: "Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness", with its exquisite calligraphy intertwined with vines, was painted over with apparent thoughtlessness. These acts of cultural vandalism were probably carried out in the name of functionality and modernism. Mercifully, no such misguided renovations were carried out on the exterior of the building. It survives today virtually intact.

In 1945, with the amazing strides women had made in society during the war years, it seemed logical to many of them that they should assume greater participation in the decision-making bodies of the church. Ardath Crowhurst, for example, had been an air-traffic controller at Dorval Airport during the war. Women had also finally gained the right to vote in Quebec elections in 1940.



WESLEY SANCTUARY, 1927

The Woman's Association moved at the congregational meeting that women be allowed to stand for election to the Session (Elders) and the Board of Stewards. This meant real representation on the Official Board beyond the two token positions. This turned out to be too controversial, however, and the motion was tabled until the following year. With many women divided on the issue, it was voted down at the 1946 meeting. Shamefully, it was not until 1962 that women could become stewards, and 1976 to become elders. From today's standpoint, one wonders what the fuss was all about.

A new assistant minister, the Rev. Cameron Quigley, served during the war years from 1944 to 1946. In 1946 a new organ console was purchased. By 1947 church membership peaked at 2,501, even 3,800 if one counts adherents. Simultaneously a long and fruitful period came to an end. On April 30, the Rev. B. B. Brown retired from Wesley. An eight-foot high oil painting of the cherished minister was donated by artist Alan Leighton Wilkinson. It features the pastor with his characteristic smile and his favorite building at his side. The Rev. Dr. Norman McMurray answered the call to replace him, and the Rev. Robert S. Beal arrived in 1948 as the assistant minister.

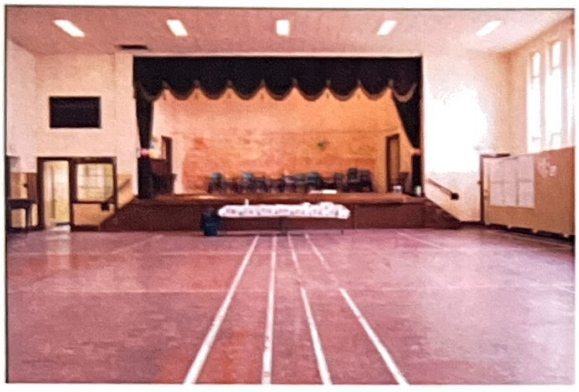
THE TRANSITIONAL YEARS: 1949-1959



WESLEY UNITED CHURCH HOLDS MORTGAGE BURNING CEREMONY
REV. SMITH (LEFT), REV. MCMURRAY (RIGHT)

At first it looked as though the upward trends would continue as they had during the forties. Many new young families were moving into the northern and western parts of NDG in the early 1950s. With the excellent worship service abilities of Rev. Dr. Norman McMurray, and good youth programming under Rev. Robert Beal, Wesley was ready to face a new era.

While not the evangelical and community activist B. B. Brown had been, Norman McMurray's strengths lay in the pulpit, and in involvement in the upper echelons of the United Church. Bob Beal as he was familiarly known, was the perfect counterpoise and was heavily involved with the youth of the church.



WESLEY HALL SERVED AS GYMNASIUM, THEATRE & CONGREGATIONAL MEETING HALL

Beal founded the Wesley Youth Council for 15 to 18 year-olds, which met every Sunday morning in the tower of the church before the Sunday services for a youth-oriented worship service with social events at other times. Young people involved in this Youth Council, such as Neil Cassidy and Joan Mullins went on to remain faithful and active members of Wesley for decades. Then in 1953, the Rev. Beal answered the call to another church. While many student ministers and deaconesses helped out during the fifties, no other assistant minister was called by Wesley.



HALL "A" WITH SUNDAY SCHOOL ROOMS OFFSIDE SERVED SMALLER CHILDREN ESPECIALLY

In 1953, the mortgage debt on the building was finally paid off. For the first time in its 40-year history, Wesley was debt-free. Traditional activities continued with a large Sunday School for children, an active Men's Club and the dynamic Young People's Union, where courtships often led to lasting marriages. The women organized huge rummage sales each spring and fall, raising a great deal of money for the church. Military Whist was another popular activity and a great spring luncheon was held by all the women's groups together. Christmas dinner was put on for the entire congregation as well. The choir had 30 to 35 members, processing the traditional way down the centre aisle.

Reflective of the enormous baby boom underway in the 1950s, groups relevant to young people were in full swing. Cubs, Boy Scouts, Explorers and C.G.I.T. were all very active. Youth Council was for mid-teens while the Young People's Union focussed on the late teens. The Young Adult Group, geared to young people in their twenties, was very popular as was the Married Couples Club. There was also the Coronation Mission Band for children, the Burton Brown Mission Circle and the Junior Woman's Association. Almost all the groups inherited from the 1930s also continued as before.

Several unique forms of worship were held at Wesley during this period. Rev. McMurray was a member of the Masonic order and once a year a service saw the Masons grandly processing down the aisle, dressed in their traditional aprons with all the pomp and ceremony associated with the Masonic

movement. Each spring, Flower Sunday was held with children processing into the church carrying gifts of flowers and plants to place on the altar in a celebration of the beauty of God's spring. Easter service actually required extra chairs in the aisles.

The most significant contribution of the 1950s to the sanctuary was the addition of stained-glass windows. From 1950 to 1959, eleven different donors came forward to donate stained-glass windows. In all, seventeen windows were commissioned most, if not all, coming from the prestigious Robert McCausland firm in Toronto. McCausland claims to be the oldest glass studio in North America, having been founded in 1854. The firm estimates it has produced almost two thirds of all stained-glass throughout Canada.



IN MEMORY OF
F/O ALLAN R. HALL

Most windows feature a theme around Jesus, such as Jesus and the Lost Lamb, the crucified Christ, Christ the King, or "Suffer the little children to come unto me". Other windows feature apostles like St. Paul, St. John, St. James, while one features Ruth from the Old Testament. One unusual window is devoted to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Most of these windows were donated by individuals in memory of a loved one; three windows were donated in memory of sons lost during World War II. One window was donated by the Wesley Men's Club and another by the Woman's Association. The two rose windows are unusual in their dazzling, saturated colours.



Many renovations were carried out in 1959. The interior of the sanctuary was repainted in pastel colours once again. More tastefully, beautiful wrought-iron railings were added to all the outdoors entranceways, complementing the Arts & Crafts look very nicely. Finally, the modern wooden panelling in the Chancel, soaring up and around the rose window, was installed in memory of the Rev. Dr. Robert Smith who had been Wesley's much loved minister from 1918 to 1924 and had died recently.

It turned out by the end of the decade that most of the urban growth in NDG actually benefitted Rosedale, Montreal West and Queen Mary Road United churches rather than Wesley, since they were better located to serve these new families. A more troubling trend, however, was the strong attraction of the West Island suburbs.



IN MEMORY OF
PVT. ARTHUR G. LAING

A whole new way of building suburbs had been born with detached single-family homes sitting on larger lots in communities with new modern schools and modern shopping centres all planned around the automobile. This new phenomenon drew many families away from Wesley as the West Island became the place to live. NDG looked increasingly old-fashioned and dog-eared. Membership began to decline.



FURNACE CLINKER GRADUALLY
FILLED UP THE BASEMENT INSTEAD
OF BEING TAKEN OUT FOR GARBAGE
DISPOSAL

THE YEARS OF SECULARISM AND DECLINE: 1960-1984

As if the massive flight to the suburbs wasn't enough to cope with, the 1960s brought an intense movement toward secularization. People simply began to drop away from the church. In 1962, membership stood at 1,653. Rev. McMurray saw the need to consolidate structures and chaired the national committee which proposed to merge the deeply rooted and separate Women's Missionary Society and Woman's Association.



50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION IN 1963 WITH ANNE LEE, HEAD OF UCW, HARVEY LEE, TRUSTEE AND ELDER, ABIGAIL LEE, FOUNDING MEMBER, 1913

The United Church Women was born in 1962, and at Wesley, under the able leadership of Helen Smith, contained an amazing 14 distinct units. Each unit had a different emphasis and tended to focus on different age groups. It was also in 1962 that women were finally allowed to become stewards at Wesley. One of their first projects was to undertake the renovation of the original church hall under the sanctuary. In 1962, with fresh paint, new mobile room dividers and a modern ventilation system, the hall became the Youth Centre, devoted to teenage activities and the younger children's Sunday School.

In 1964, Rev. McMurray left the charge at a time when membership stood at 1,500 people. This represented a drastic drop of 1000 members since a decade and a half ago. In tune with the times, a younger minister, the Rev. Donald J. Miller, was called. He and his wife brought a young image to Wesley at a time when society was extremely youth oriented. However, Donald Miller's very poor health, followed by a heart attack, seriously hampered his ministry and the growth of Wesley. He resigned in 1969.

In 1968, an attempt was made to bolster membership by canvassing a new 13-storey high-rise building on Monkland. The secular age being in full swing, only eight residents expressed any interest in church and ultimately only one joined Wesley. B. B. Brown never had to face such disinterest.

Against the backdrop of an aggressive bombing campaign by the FLQ in Montreal, some of which had exploded in nearby Westmount, with political assassinations and cities erupting in violence and arson in the neighbouring United States, the Rev. Dr. Stanley Frost took on an interim ministry at Wesley. A vice principal of McGill University and a member of Wesley since the mid-fifties, he held the congregation together spiritually in 1969-1970. This was to be the first of three occasions when he would step into the pulpit during a time of crisis.

In 1970, under the cloud of the FLQ October crisis and military occupation of Montreal, a doughty Scotsman, Rev. Alex J. T. Henderson, undertook a new ministry at Wesley. He warmed the hearts of many a person of Scottish origin in the congregation with his strong Scottish burr. He also had a good sense of humour and drew from deep life experience having campaigned in Burma during the war. This was very helpful during such unprecedented and difficult times. Church membership in 1971 was down to 846 with 53 adherents for a total of 899.

His wife, Dr. Marion Henderson, introduced a new concept into the church's life, having a career of her own and therefore being unable to fulfill the traditional role of minister's wife. With the extraordinary service offered to church groups, and the woman's organizations in particular, by every single minister's wife right down to Grace McMurray and Betty Miller, Wesley would now have to do without an actively involved minister's wife. The old two-for-the price-of-one model was no longer feasible.

Sadly, Alex Henderson too had serious health problems, and suffered two heart attacks toward the end of his ministry at Wesley. These problems caused his resignation in 1983, with the Rev. Dr. Stanley Frost once again stepping into the breach in 1983-85 as interim minister.

During these challenging times, the U. C. W. was a mainstay, both in keeping the church together socially and financially under the able leadership of such women as Anne Lee, Barbara McPherson, Frances Whiteley, as well as many others. Harvey Lee, as long-standing Clerk of Session, Alex Leadingham and Reg Uden as treasurers and Gilbert Allan as long-standing chair of Stewards, provided the stability and good management that allowed the church to stay afloat financially while carrying on with its mission in the heart of NDG.

Added to the difficulties of suburban flight, the secularization of society, and an aging neighbourhood, came the flight of capital and head offices following the election of a separatist government in 1976 and the first referendum for separation in 1980.

As big companies left Montreal, many more dynamic people both young and old were forced to leave with them. Wesley's congregation was now aging and dispirited and much reduced in numbers. One church group after another closed down after decades of intense activity. Children had literally evaporated. From 412 children in Sunday School in 1962, only 30 were enrolled in 1979, dropping to four in 1983.

It was beginning to look as though Wesley no longer had a future. The only ray of hope was when the large Korean United Church joined Wesley as tenants in October 1979, bringing both a steady revenue and much-needed life and activity to Wesley's cavernous halls.



WESLEY HANDCRAFT FAIR, 1975



THE FORMER LADIES PARLOUR BECAME THE BOARD ROOM AND WAS REDECORATED BY THE MASONS FOR THEIR SERVICES



SPACIOUS HALL "B" SERVED THE NEEDS OF SUNDAY SCHOOL WORSHIP,WITH CLASSROOMS OFF THE HALL. THE CHILDREN VANISHED BY THE EIGHTIES

THE BEGINNINGS OF RENEWAL, THEN BETRAYAL: 1985-1996

Another chapter of change opened with the calling of the Rev. P. Anne Hall to Wesley in September, 1985. For the first time an ordained woman minister was to occupy the pulpit. She brought great intellectual rigour and depth to her preaching. The manse on Draper Avenue, which had been bought in the 1920s to house the minister, was sold in 1984, so a housing allowance was now required.

Anne Hall placed a sign, "Assume nothing", prominently on her desk. She struggled hard to fight the negativism that was thoroughly ingrained in much of the congregation. She was determined to turn things around. She also fought valiantly to re-affirm Wesley's traditional role of outreach to the community. A firm believer in the Christian principle of giving to those less fortunate, she argued persuasively that if Wesley was to shut down, best to do so while serving the community to the last. She showed amazing pluck and determination, never once flinching from her goals.

True to her purpose and with the help of trustee Rob Bull, Wesley was slowly turning into a small community centre. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Irish music and Head & Hands were now occupying the building regularly. Each year the Wesley congregation voted to grant monies to local organizations like the NDG Food Bank as well as the United Church Mission & Service Fund. For a small congregation of 230 people in 1995 (153 members and 77 adherents), it was quite an accomplishment.

In 1992, the local Polish Catholic congregation down the street, looking for a church of their own, made an offer of $440,000 for the purchase of the building. The offer was ridiculously low and was rejected. Also in that year, the accidental death of a long-time and valued member, Harvey Lamb Lee, saddened the congregation. Wesley Hall was officially renamed in his memory.

While the congregation continued to slowly dwindle due to deaths and removals to Ontario, its make-up began to gradually change. It was definitely becoming more multi-ethnic in keeping with the character of the neighbourhood. It was also beginning to attract younger members. Starting at rock-bottom with one child in Sunday School in 1985, the number of children slowly began to creep upwards so that by 1996, enrollment had climbed to 20 children and a new youth group was functioning.

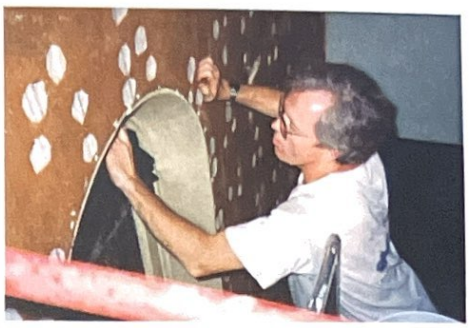
A dark cloud hung over the Wesley congregation, however, during the 1990s. It was the rapidly accumulating deficit. At first it was $2,000 to $5,000 annually, but soon soared to $10,000 and $20,000, rapidly depleting most of its cash reserves. Tensions soared as Anne Hall continued to preach unremittingly on the principle of giving. Finally, unable to afford a minister, Anne Hall offered to resign at the end of 1996. It was an unfortunately sour ending to what had been a fruitful and progressive period.

Early in 1997, a Steward made a startling discovery. Acting on a hunch, she found curious irregularities in the church's financial records. A secret investigation was launched and it was discovered that the treasurer, who was also the long-standing organist at Wesley, had been bilking the church accounts of thousands of dollars. A provable theft of $28,369 was accounted for, and the perpetrator, under threat of legal action, paid it back. Unfortunately the real loss was believed to be possibly double that and to have gone back many more years.

The betrayal of trust was of epic proportions. The entire congregation reeled from the shock. The bitterness over the harm done to Rev. Anne Hall caused several resignations. A few others, simply discouraged, just melted away. As if to rub salt in the wounds, Montreal Presbytery found a surplus church to grant to the Korean United congregation that same year. They had been occupants of Wesley Church for over 17 years. The sudden loss of $30,000 annual revenue was a huge blow. Never had Wesley's future seemed so grim as it did in 1996 and 1997.

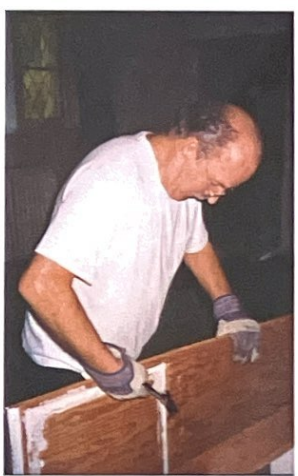
HERITAGE AND RECOMMITMENT: 1997-2004

After death comes new life. While Wesley lost its minister and money in 1996, the church buildings obtained heritage status through the efforts of trustee Dr. David Hanna, a professor at the University of Québec. This paved the way for obtaining heritage restoration grants. The Arts & Crafts monument was included in the Québec Religious Heritage Foundation's programme for major funding. Funded by the Ministry of Culture, the Foundation, of which Hanna was a board member, had provided funds since 1995 for significant heritage churches.



MERRITT ADAMS OUR TECHNICAL EXPERT AT WORK 1998

In September 1996, a professional building study was provided by Denis Laflamme, architect. In early 1997, the leaking roof over the sanctuary was redone for $35,000. Later in 1997, the church tower, part of which threatened to collapse into the street, was stabilized and restored with a grant of $110,000. In 1998, the sanctuary buttresses were repaired, the rose window masonry work restored, and the Royal Avenue entrance rebuilt with a grant of $42,000. While the Foundation grants generally covered 85% of the costs, the Montreal Presbytery's Finance & Extension Board generously covered the rest.



MARCEL GAGNÉ DISMANTLING STORAGE UNIT IN PARLOUR 2004

Since word of Wesley's collapse in 1997 had gone out, an unsolicited offer to purchase the building came from the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in early 1998. When the offer of $975,000 was conveyed to the congregation, along with the news that the pews, organ and stained-glass windows would be removed, the vote was unanimous in rejecting it. The offer was then increased to $1,400,000 but again the congregation firmly rejected it.

With a new sense of purpose gained from the heritage grants, trustees Merritt Adams, Stan Cunningham and David Hanna launched an audacious, even crazy, volunteer project. From June 1998 until March 1999, volunteers from the congregation, including many of our teenagers' friends, erected scaffolding in the two transepts, stripped off acoustic tiles, repaired the walls, washed them down, and painted them in the original colour. The organ music and singing suddenly recovered their vibrancy and the stained-glass windows came alive against the orange-ochre walls. It was a tremendous exercise in congregational fellowship for young and old alike and the giddiness of working 45 feet up in the air was exhilarating.

On the pastoral front, much is owed to the Rev. Dr. Stanley Frost who for the third time in Wesley's history carried us through with an interim ministry, in 1997-99, as a gift to his church. He was ably seconded by lay preacher Kathy McIntosh, who took us through a congregational healing process, and the Rev. Rosemary Lambie-Bromby.

Finally, in August 1999, the Rev. Martha Nell Thomson was called to a half-time ministry. The Montreal Presbytery's mission-support committee graciously offered Wesley enough funding for a three-quarter ministry until 2005. Martha Nell brought a new style to Wesley focussing especially on inclusiveness. Her husband Milton, a retired engineer, was very happy to participate fully as the "minister's wife".



VALERIE HANNA WORKING ON ROSE WINDOW 1998



VOLUNTEER CREW PAINTING
THE EAST TRANSEPT 1999

Much is also owed to Ken Dunlop, Clerk of Session, who kept the pulpit supplied in times of need and the choir together at all times. His most spectacular find was an unknown 17-year-old organ student named Ryan Enright to play the organ beginning in 1997. Ryan's amazing musical talents uplifted the congregation's spirits immeasurably. He has since moved on and in 2004 received Québec's top prize for young organists.

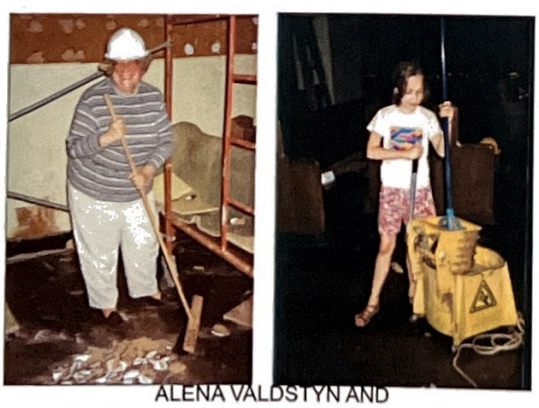
Many other significant contributions came during this crucial period. Joe Angelus took excellent care of the finances while Graham Weeks spearheaded membership drives and re-visioning. Connie Blake and Irene Meikle kept the U.C.W. on track, while David Hanna's community space committee brought new community groups to Wesley, increasing rental revenue from $22,500 in 1998 to $40,000 in 2001.

Beth Sissons worked tirelessly in the gardens surrounding the church, as well as producing an occasional Weschat newsletter. Merritt Adams offered repair work wherever needed. Johanna Morrow baked communion bread, organized food for work bees and ran the Sunday School. Many other people offered other gifts of time and talent. Membership in 1998 may only have stood just a little over 100 people, but they were dedicated!

More heritage grants arrived. A new study was produced by Fernando Pellicer, architect, for the Sunday School building in 2000. This resulted in a grant of almost $95,000 for the restoring, during 2002, of about one third of the leaded- glass windows which were literally falling apart. Another grant of about $18,000 arrived in 2003 for the re-pointing of brickwork on the building. A new sound system was also installed in 2001.

Wesley's big opportunity for the future finally came in 2002 after the Québec Government announced a new innovative programme for churches called "Partial Recycling". It was designed to help heritage churches become financially self-sufficient by offering a one-time renovation grant for the recycling of large empty spaces within their buildings. If the church was capable of producing a good business plan, the newly renovated spaces could provide stable tenants for the church's financial survival.

Dr. David Hanna was by now president of the Foundation's Montreal region. Based on Wesley's long-standing attempts to turn the Sunday School building into a viable community centre, he proposed Wesley United Church as a pilot project. The proposal was accepted by both the Foundation and the Ministry of Culture in April 2002. A grant of $32,250 for a feasibility study was offered and by October, the Foundation approved a grant of $600,000 for the community centre project focussed around a daycare.



ALENA VALDSTYN AND
KELLINA HIGGINS ON WORK BEE CLEANUP
1998

The project almost died for want of a viable daycare centre until church member Liane Tusa decided to take the plunge and open a private 60-child daycare centre herself. The next hurdle was almost insurmountable. The true cost of renovating the building far exceeded the grant offered by the Foundation. Finally one year later, with a good tenant package secured and renovation expenses cut to the bone, all parties approved the project in November 2003. Architect Philippe Bertrand drew up the plans and on May 17, 2004 construction began. Completed in record time by September, the official ribbon-cutting took place on November 14, 2004, preceded by a service of celebration in the sanctuary.

The final cost of the project was $1,050,750. A sum of $210,000 was loaned by Montreal Presbytery's Finance and Extension Board, and the remaining $208,500 came directly from Wesley which had to liquidate all its remaining funds and borrow from its members. Members of Wesley church contributed over 400 people-hours in meetings to get the project together. They also had to put in over 800 people-hours to clean out the Sunday School building in time for construction and also clean up after construction. Everyone became experts at loading dumpsters efficiently.



WILHELMINA FREDERICKS PAINTING WALLS 1999

None of this volunteer work took into account the countless hours spent over the year by our chair of trustees Arthur Schweitzer, trustee and tenant coordinator Elizabeth Leslie and engineer Milton Thomson who followed the project and problem-solved on a day-to-day basis. Schweitzer, who was a retired lawyer, also dealt with the legal aspects of the construction, the financial cash flow for the project and prepared all the leases for the new occupants.

The former Sunday School building now houses the "Petits anges de Wesley" daycare for 60 children on the ground floor together with a smaller Harvey Lee Memorial Hall for congregational gatherings and other uses. Upstairs the "Par-dessus l'arc-en-ciel" daycare for 20 children, together with the offices of the NDG Community Council, the Mont-Royal Music School for children and the Canadian Christian Meditation Community fill the former Sunday School spaces. Many other community groups use spaces in other parts of Wesley's premises.



A WARM KITCHEN AND HOME-MADE FOOD ESSENTIAL TO A WORK BEE: LESLIE SNOD-GRASS AND JOHANNA MORROW 1999

The basement is renovated and rented for storage purposes. Our former Sunday School building is completely full for the first time in decades. The beautiful parlour next to the sanctuary is now restored thanks to volunteer labour. Our dream is to complete the restoration of the interior of the sanctuary and reveal once again the words around the chancel arch: "Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness".

Miracles really do happen to people who believe. Now Wesley Church and its new community center go forth into the future with a clear purpose and a new mission. Thanks be to God.

David B. Hanna
November 14, 2004
Montréal, Québec



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O mankind! We created You from a single (pair) Of a male and a female, And made you into Nations and tribes that Ye may know one another (Not that ye may despise One another)

Adapted from Sarah 49:13

But I say to you that if you are angry with anyone, you will be liable to be judged. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, first be reconciled to your brother or sister; then come and offer your gift.

Adapted from Matthew 5:22-24

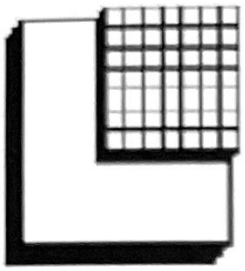
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The Wesley Church project has made it possible to bring the Sunday School building up to current construction standards, to install an elevator, and to recycle the building for the use of two daycares and other community organizations.

We thank everyone - professionals and subcontractors – who contributed to the success of this project and most importantly, to the satisfaction of our customer, Wesley United Church.

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FOR THOSE WHO MINISTER,
AND FOR THOSE WHO WORSHIP HERE.
SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE.