

Perhaps the most ambitious project undertaken by the church was the St. Giles restaurant booth at the Central Canada Exhibition held annually at Landsdowne Park.

In 1957, St. Giles had an active and robust congregation. The church had just purchased land on First Avenue and built Logan-Vencta hall. The congregation was looking for ways to bring in additional revenue and decided to take part in the Exhibition with a food tent. What began as a little hot dog stand grew to be a dining facility that could serve more than one hundred people. At the time, the avenue on the Ex grounds was known as church row as it housed several church eateries. When St. Giles finally ceased participating in the Ex in 1997, we were the only church booth left.

Every August when the Ex opened its doors the congregation of St. Giles was galvanized into cooking roast turkeys and beef for hot and cold sandwiches, and ordering food and other supplies. There was the dreaded wait for the call asking for how many shifts one could be counted on to volunteer. This was a major recruiting operation as volunteers were needed for both the church and booth kitchen to cook and serve for a 16-hour a day operation for ten days. In addition, after the booth closed each night at midnight, there was still a massive cleanup to be done and preparation for the next day such as filling all the condiment bottles. And this didn't include the set-up and demolition of the tent. Muriel and George Lee were the booth's managers for nearly all the forty years and were present for every shift and the opening and closing requirements.

The booth catered to a cross-section of Ex goers – from families attending concerts to midway workers and bikers. The menu offered an eclectic mix in addition to the beef and turkey; ranging from hamburgers and hot dogs, French fries and various sandwiches. Breakfast was a particular favourite of the Ex workers. We were often told that parents wouldn't allow their children to eat anywhere but a church booth. Clearly a favourite, on busy days people were lined up three deep around the booth to gain entrance.

During its forty years of operation, there were many tales to tell. For example, on one occasion a young mid-way worker jumped into the canal and sadly drowned. Our minister, Duncan Kennedy, was asked to provide a funeral service to be held at midnight after the Ex closed. Duncan was happy to oblige and provide a service to the community. On another occasion, the normal peaceful booth operation was disrupted by baseball wielding young men angry about a supposed slight. Yelling who was in charge, clearly planning mishap to that person, the situation was diffused when told the manager was a woman. Fortunately, these young men were not equal opportunity hooligans and quietly retreated.

On a happier note, participating at the Ex, whether in the church, at the booth, or ferrying supplies, fostered companionship and a sense of working toward a common goal among the congregation. Yes, it was hard work, but on the whole it was fun.

This sense of companionship spread beyond the congregation. Friends of parishioners often volunteered their services. A fellow Presbyterian Minister once stopped by to say hello. He probably regretted the visit as we were very short staffed that evening. We handed him an apron and his first order was to make 12 hot roast beef sandwiches. He took it in good stead. In addition, many neighbourhood young people asked to take part as servers working for tips. The booth offered a safe place for these young people and one boy stayed with us for many years, later becoming our janitor and watchman working at the booth overnight.

A guiding principal of the St. Giles Ex booth, and one we believe was successfully fulfilled, was that it should serve a triple purpose: helping the church financially, providing a venue for fellowship, and being a Christian presence in the community.

(by Nancy Lee)