

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK...

What it's like to be 'the little church with a big heart'

by **Monika Regina Martyn**, Calgary

Looking at me, you might easily think of me as an old mother. Still handsome, my red-brick jacket is weathered from winter storms and wrinkled from the humid Ontario summers. My eyes are stained with splintered glass but still look brightly out into the community in which I stand. Like a mother, my doors open wide to welcome both old and new members. I have been the church in the small community of Seagrave, Ont., for more than a century.

I've lost count of the renovations as well as the fire and the mergers that made me into today's United Church.



The author's mother-in-law, Barb Martyn, and Barb's husband, Rick McAskill, attend Ontario's Seagrave United Church and do much of the administration work for the congregation. Monika wrote this story from the church building's perspective to help shine a light on the kindness of its congregants, and the important role the church plays in the community at home—and as far away as Panama.

Windows have been donated, roof fixed, trim painted, and the interior unearthed and refurbished.

I've never had a steeple or a brass bell to chime. Nor have I needed one, as my congregation hears its toll regardless. Their kind hearts, helping hands and comforting spirits have knocked on the doors of the unwell, bolstered the unfortunate, held the hands of the newly bereaved and lifted spoonfuls of medicine for those unable to. They laugh together over cups of tea and coffee, and organize this and that. It seems that they've never forgotten that together they can

touch the lives of others, and that a hug or a kind word and gesture are their own powerful currency.

As a church, I've always been proud of my congregation, but in the fall of 2014, when they were asked to help a cause outside of their own community, they overwhelmed me.

Two of my flock, Barb Martyn and Rick McAskill, called on them to help a rural school in Panama. They had heard of the school's plight from Georgina Kolm, who is a volunteer English teacher. There were 75 children, six teachers and no functioning toilets or sinks. There

was nothing to do but fix the situation.

Barb and Rick are "winter cheaters," and I can't blame them. They are lucky to be able to escape to Panama every April for three weeks to shorten the harsh Canadian winters.

Panama is a developing nation at the bottom of Central America. Small in land mass—think of Lake Michigan on the map—it's not difficult to meet some of its friendly population. The country's school children, dressed in their navy and white school uniforms, would melt anyone's heart.

Together, Barb and Rick presented what



Above: This congregation is the heart of the little church in Seagrave, Ont. Rick is pictured semi-kneeling next to the minister while Barb is behind him; at right: while on vacation, Barb and Rick visited the Panamanian kindergarten class.



they knew of Panama, its people and the condition of the school to their congregation. "Could you help and chip in a few dollars?" they had asked. They hoped that if there were extra funds, maybe something could also be done with the government-allocated rice and beans stacked on benches and floors. The mice were getting fat from nibbling on it.

The donations flooded in, and their

generosity quickly funded the entire project. This act of kindness had spread out to the community, to associations and individuals who donated beyond anyone's expectations. A crew of Canadians living in Panama volunteered to do the work. Hardy, Georgina's husband, and Kevin, Barb's son,

did the physical labour at no charge. They replaced the toilets and sinks, and built a concrete pantry and installed the shelving.

The parents in the community were touched that strangers from so far away could care so much about their children. My congregation's kindness did not go unnoticed.

I'm proud of my people and their giving spirit. That's why I'm called "the little church with a big heart." ■

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