

A tribute to Rev. Bruce Besley on the 43rd anniversary of HMF church service

Written By **REV. GORD HORSLEY**

The Heritage Music festival in Shelburne is upon us, the preparations for the event are complete, the town is in anticipation for great weather, and lots of people are expected to come out and enjoy the weekend.

As I help prepare the Church Service the Shelburne Ministerial hold on Sunday at 10 a.m., in the Shelburne Arena, it dawns on me this service has been going on for 43 years now, the event itself has been going for 68 years.

43 years ago Rev. Bruce Besley had a vision of having a Church service on the Sunday morning after the contest had finished Saturday night. Of course, like every visionary, he had naysayers, and many obstacles logistically, but that did not deter him. I am glad, I get to be part of what he started a good chunk of my life ago, and has become a tradition on this weekend for 43 years.

This article is a tribute to Rev. Besley and a brief history of the service he has inspired us to continue holding as long as the Heritage Music Festival (Fiddle Contest) exists.

I pray I can continue to do the Church service justice, and keep the honor of a great man of God and his vision alive. Also, please be gracious with me to the limitation of the knowledge I have from the years Rev. Stokes (who took over from Rev. Besley when he retired) led the service, until I came to Shelburne 15 years ago. Since I have been here Rev. Tipping, Rev. MacMillan, Rev. Barbara Moulton, Deacon Fernandez, Father Mark Curtis and Rev. Bob McLellan have brought the message at the service. Please join us Sunday, August 12 th at 10 a.m.

Here's a history of the first twelve years of the Fiddleville Church Service in Rev. Besley's own words:

The general consensus (1975), among those involved with the weekend events was that everyone was worn out, that no one would be interested in anything on Sunday. After all there were days of preparation leading up to the mammoth event, then the steady work from Friday afternoon through to the early hours of Saturday. The work load for Saturday starts early with cleanup in the arena, numbering and placing of 2,500 chairs in preparation for the 7:00 pm Saturday night, as all seats are reserved. Packed in the middle of this event, is the fiddle Parade at 1 pm to 3 pm in which most workers are involved also. So it just seemed too much to pack in something more- beside many thought that only a few would be in the mood for a Church service Sunday morning after three days and nights of a carnival atmosphere in the town.

However, I gave some considerable thought to the possibility of holding a service of a lighter and more informal nature conducted from the stage of the Fiddle Contest. To accommodate the clean up and dismantling process of the Rotary Club the service would be held early enough to allow time after the service to pack away chairs and dismantle the stage.

I was a brand new member of the Rotary Club so it was with a bit of daring that I proposed my plan to try the arrangement of a community Church service on the Sunday morning following the Fiddle Contest. I shall never forget the profound silence with which my proposal was greeted. Then my good friend and fellow Rotarian Dr. Carm Redmond stood up to support my proposal ? ?I think that if Rev. Bruce wants to try this, we should give him our blessing.? There was obvious skepticism and doubt about the success of such a seeming impossible dream. So, willing to take up the dare, we launched our first try at it after the 1975 Fiddle Contest.

Help that first year was hard to come by. So we went to the arena at 6:30 a.m., a few of us cleaned up the disheveled mess after the Saturday night dance ? tried to make the stage into a worship centre and set up about 100 chairs thinking ? ?well ? that would be an improvement over the 40 or so that attended at Trinity on previous years.

Arrangements were made in advance to have some special music and singing. Mrs. Irma Maltby graciously agreed to be the organist with her own special organ brought in carefully that morning. Mrs. Dorothy Houston had also agreed in advance to support the trial event as pianist. Both of these talented women had served me as organists in churches. Their lively, spirited accompaniment helped greatly in setting the atmosphere I wanted. I had advertised through various means including promotion by a float in the Fiddleville Parade ? both the service and the wish to have volunteer fiddlers, guitarists and others to play on stage for the service. The result was nothing less than fantastic. To the delight and inspiration of the 250 who came that first year we had about 10 fiddlers and other musicians to join with the pianist and organist to provide the accompaniment and leadership for the congregational singing. Dorothy Houston spoke briefly and sang a solo and has followed this tradition every year since. On that first occasion and for several years we were blessed and inspired by the Hillsburg male Quartet.

The mood and atmosphere each year has been set by a spirit of informality, openness, friendliness, warmth and spontaneity. We encouraged those in attendance to be prepared to laugh, to clap, to shed a tear and to reach out and take their neighbors hand as we united in singing the theme song ? ?Amazing Grace??. There was no long message or sermon as such and there have been persons that tell me there should be. However, my philosophy from the outset has been the whole service in a multitude of ways was coming

across strong with a greater message than many sermons. We included meaningful scripture readings with brief comments, poems and readings with powerful messages were interspersed throughout ? concluding with the appropriate poem ? ?The Touch of The Master's Hand. (The Old Violin) then yours truly sang ?He Touched Me.?

Well ? it has resulted in one of the most incredible responses ? far beyond my wildest dreams. That first year ? as mentioned above, 250 persons came ? I am sure out of curiosity and support for me ?but the next year 1976 ? there were 500 who came ? the next year 1000 ?the next year 1500- each year increasing till the past two years (1985/86) we have had 3000 or so. Believe me it is an awesome experience to walk out to the front of the Fiddleville Stage ? dressed up for Church ? with an altar arranged below ? and to face 3000 people with an enthusiastic anticipation beaming from their whole beings ?Hoping and praying that we wouldn't disappoint them. As I said, for some it has been a disappointment, but obviously it is not for many as the enthusiastic, positive comments will verify.

As in anything we work at, change must come ? so in this certain changes have had to be incorporated. It is much different handling 3000 persons than the initial 250. There have been changes in talent provided each year as we strive to vary the leadership. Dorothy Houston, Irma Maltby, myself are the three constants each year also a number of faithful fiddlers, guitarists etc. ? but new faces and talent come forward each year.

While the service is billed as Ecumenical it has been started and managed almost entirely from the outset by myself (The United Church Minister), and Board members of Trinity United Church. The ecumenical part of it comes with the broad spectrum of denominations represented from near and far. One year we had a role call of members from sixteen different denominations including a good number of Roman Catholics, and a few of the Jewish faith. Persons have indicated they come to Fiddleville and the Church Service from other countries and cities and towns all around Ontario and thee USA. Neighboring charges of the United Church have been closing their churches and coming by bus to attend the Sunday morning service. From the outset 40-50 chairs have been reserved for residents of Dufferin Oaks Home for the Aged. Many have indicated they travel upward of 40-50 miles Sunday morning to attend the service. It is obvious it is attracting many others than the Fiddleville campers and visitors around town. Some attend who do not attend Church on a regular basis and seem deeply moved and inspired by the experience. What will happen down the future we cannot predict ? we leave it in the hands of the Good Lord to guide and direct.

The Church service is now put together by the Shelburne Ministerial, the local Churches in the Shelburne area. I would like to thank the Shelburne Fire Department for helping with parking, they have blessed us over the years with their service - thanks again, and I am most grateful to the Rotary club for allowing us to be part of the Heritage Music Festival, thank you so much!

Don't forget, immediately following the Church service is the annual Pork BBQ. Please make a day of it and join us, as we fill your spirits with joy and feed your stomachs with great food.

I hope this article has kept the memory of Rev. Bruce Besley alive, may we never forget.