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Dickens? message of Christmas comes to Shelburne next week

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After a visit to a ?ragged school? in an English slum in late 1843, Charles Dickens set out to write a story that would inspire those of means to help the impoverished and oppressed. Dickens' message to ?honour Christmas? in our hearts, and ?try to keep it all the year? came in his timeless tale A Christmas Carol. Shelburne audiences will have an opportunity to hear the classic story told once again, December 14th at Trinity United Church, in A Dickens of an Evening - a distinctive reading by performer Jeffery Cottam with music by Bruce Ley.

The reading performance made its debut last year at Trinity, and returns by popular demand. ?People have said they want to see it again and want to bring more people, family and friends with them this time around,? says Jeffery Cottam. ?Word got around.? says the producer and performer, ?and we received invitations to do eight shows in all this year.? The show opened two weeks ago in Toronto and will travel as far as Ottawa.

In the spirit of Dickens, the readings are fund-raising events to support the work of Partera International, a Peacemaking initiative led by Mr. Cottam's wife, Reverend Lee Ann McKenna. Rev. McKenna travels the world, often to very volatile locations, to teach non-violent, conflict-resolution strategies that help others work towards equality and peace.

Reverend Candice Bist says Partera came to the attention of her United Church Pastoral Charge because LeeAnn McKenna is an adherent at Primrose United Church. She says that as Rev. McKenna and her husband became more involved in the church, the congregation came to understand the training and services that she was offering in Canada and throughout the world.

?The churches no longer have the people or resources to be doing all this work themselves,? says Rev. Bist. ?By supporting Partera, we have an international voice for peace that we could not possibly have on our own.? All profits from A Dickens of an Evening will go to support Partera International as it continues vital work in Africa, India and the Philippines in 2019.

The multi-media presentation of A Christmas Carol features stage lighting and special effects such as fog, firelight, the clanging of bells and the dragging of chains. Improvised musical accompaniment is brilliantly provided by master musician Bruce Ley on piano and organ. Mr. Ley transports the audience seamlessly from scene to scene, while a stream of images is displayed on screens on either side of a simple, but elegant set.

?We have included many more images in the show this year to accompany the story-telling and acting,' says Jeffrey Cottam. ?In addition, there are more sound effects and music to enhance the viewing experience.?

There will be refreshments at the evening, and a Figgy Pudding Contest - as well as puddings to eat. A Dickens of an Evening publicity video is available at www.partera.ca which explains that Charles Dickens was a social activist in the Victorian period. His books illustrate the inequality of life, poverty, and oppression of the times. Jeffrey Cottam says, ?This was probably as a result of Dickens' own experiences, and that of his family, when his father was hauled off to debtor's prison leaving Charles to work from the age of ten to support his family.

?Child labour was one of the driving forces behind the rise of the wealthy industrial barons in England during the Industrial Revolution at this time,? says the performer. ?The hunger Dickens and his family experienced while his father was imprisoned is thought to be why, in A Christmas Carol and many other stories by Dickens, there are so many descriptive scenes of food ? over-flowing barrels of oysters, long wreaths of sausages, heaped up turkeys, geese, game, immense twelfth cakes, and seething bowls of steaming hot punch, for example.?

Recently A Dickens of an Evening was requested for a performance at a private dinner party at a home in Toronto. ?As part of our fund-raising efforts, we also cook for private dinner parties showing off our culinary skills - just like regular dinner theatre,? says Mr. Cottam. ?It was very well received and was quite lovely doing the show in an intimate setting, close to the people in the room, sitting relaxed with a glass of wine in hand or eating dessert. We hope to do more of this in the future.?

Join Jeffrey Cottam and Bruce Ley in A Dickens of an Evening Friday, December 14th, at 7:30 pm in Trinity United Church, 200 Owen Sound Street in Shelburne. Tickets are $20 for adults and children 12 and under are free. Tickets are available at the IGA Caravaggio Pharmacy in Shelburne, from the office at Trinity United Church, from members of Trinity United Church and Primrose United Church, and from Partera International by calling 416 436-3257.