

## Westwood's Winter Solstice Celebrations 1987 to 2019

Westwood has a long tradition of recognizing Earth Centered rituals. Rev. Jane Bramadat introduced our first Winter Solstice service in 1987. This was also the first year in our own building in Parkallen. Quite a dramatic year! When Rev. Bramadat left us in 1989 this special service continued with the support of key individuals. The service became a revered tradition over the next decade with attendance at the single service growing each year.

In 1998 it became a regular part of the mandate of the worship committee and the same year we started offering services at both 7:30 and 9:30 PM to make room for growing attendance. At first we felt it was important for the services to be identical so it wouldn't matter which one people attended. The choir sang for both services and refreshments were provided after each one. After a couple of years, we realized it would be better to offer a family-oriented service at 6:30 and an adult one at 9, still with the choir at both and audience related alterations to music selections and the service itself.

Between 1997 and 2001 the Edmonton Journal often listed our 7 & 9 PM services in their "10 Best Events" for the weekend. This helped meet one of our goals of reaching out into the community to let people know we existed, and it was successful in bringing in new visitors.

In 2002 with growing attendance and with intern minister, Meg Roberts' leadership and theatre arts experience, we started offering three services, the late one at 11 PM had chanting and dancing without the choir.

What did it take to offer this service three times? The volunteer sign-up sheet for 2004 (remember the year the basement flooded?) asked for: service leaders, greeters, readers, refreshment coordinators and servers, sound and light techs, setup and decorating, take down and cleaning for each of the three services. There were choir rehearsals with guest choir members from the Unitarian Church of Edmonton and other friends, and rehearsals for the service itself. Home baking was also needed for the three sets of refreshments. We later added volunteer sign up for creating our give-away items. Cleaning up after the late service was a bit of an issue. It was all quite exhausting in the middle of the holiday season.

Despite the effort involved the service was very popular to the extent that in 2007 the sanctuary was so full that we had to refuse entry to some people at the 9 o'clock service. That was uncomfortable! We decided that it was time to look for a larger venue so we could hold a single service and accommodate all comers.

Rev. Anne Barker joined us in the fall of 2008 and was immediately plunged into our first service at City Hall. It was a dramatic start as a storm damaged the glass ceiling at City Hall and they were not able to confirm that we could use the space until a very short time beforehand. We scrambled to find alternate locations in case we could not use it but very few places could accommodate our large numbers. (UCE offered but even their new sanctuary could only hold 170). Fortunately, the engineers at City Hall gave us a green light in the end but we could not advertise it until quite late.

City Hall had some great advantages: it could accommodate large numbers, was free, accessible, seasonally decorated, provided free chairs and tables with skirts, lectern, mikes, and a small kitchenette. It was a well-known, neutral (not too churchy) barrier-free location with

heated parking. We were glad of the heated parking that first year as the temperature was -31 degrees C. Despite the cold, 350 people attended that year and it was deemed a huge success and much easier than running three services. We were able to attract television coverage.

We did miss having real candles and had to purchase commercial food as home cooking was not permitted. We had always prided ourselves on having the service right on the winter solstice, but City Hall could not accommodate us when it fell on a Saturday. In the end this did not seem to affect things much and even having the service at 2 PM on a Sunday (which happened on our first service there as Sunday evenings are not available) did not seem to be significant as it was dark by the end of the service.

The acoustics were poor and eventually we ended up renting extra sound equipment and staging so people could hear and see the service better. We were able to raise between \$2,000 to \$2,800 each year for charities but our costs also grew to around \$1,800.

Attendance numbers varied from a low of 200 (with a hockey conflict?) to a high of 400 in 2011. Some people who attended Westwood's regular services later said they found us through our Winter Solstice service.

Volunteer support for the service was waning in 2017 but we persisted. In 2018 with minimal time for congregational consultation we decided not to offer a service but instead to mark the occasion that year with a private, organized potluck dinner at Westwood. There was a lot of energy around this and people decorated and set up tables up and downstairs. It was a wonderful evening and deemed very successful – but unfortunately only for a small number of people. Due to our limited space attendance had to be restricted to members and friends, excluding extended families or general friends.

In 2019 Westwoodians resumed holding a public Winter Solstice service at a different venue - the South East Edmonton Senior Centre. We were able to accommodate everyone at one service, with concentric circles of seating. Some of this was reserved for the choir. There was live music, singing, readings, poetry and ritual. The service was very successful and was followed by refreshments and a bonfire behind the building. At that time we looked forward to further evolution of the service in 2020 using what we had learned in this new venue. We could never have predicted having to reimagine an exclusively online winter solstice celebration! But no doubt, that will too be filled with meaning and beauty too. Westwood is always ready for a challenge.

Prepared by Lorian Kennedy, November 2020.