

## Church helps create townhomes



From left, Sharon O'Connor-Watters, the Rev. Helena-Rose Houldcroft, Eva Leca, Deacon Barbara Russell and Gary Russell join Cathy Borowec (far right) and parish volunteers at a pancake brunch at the church.

BY ELIN GOULDEN ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2025  
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### Parish provides food and funds

The experience of St. George, Grafton shows that a church does not need to have land – or even building expertise – to facilitate the creation of housing in its community.

In 2022, the congregation embarked on a consultation with other local churches and groups to discern how they could respond to needs in the local community. “We wanted to be mission-minded, but we weren’t sure what direction we should be going in, so we invited our partners in the surrounding community into conversation with us,” says the Rev. Helena-Rose Houldcroft, priest-in-charge.

At the same time, Habitat for Humanity Northumberland was working on plans to create seven net-zero emissions townhomes in the village of Baltimore, north of Cobourg. It would be the largest single development of Habitat for Humanity Northumberland, and the largest net-zero project for Habitat for Humanity in all of Canada. The townhomes, now completed, feature heat pumps for heating and cooling, as well as solar panels that feed electricity back into the grid. The build also incorporates Universal Design, making the units more accessible to people with different abilities.

Inspired by the project and its focus on building not just housing but relationships, parishioners at St. George’s looked for ways to help support the build. “We’re a little church that doesn’t say ‘it can’t happen,’ but rather, ‘how can we make it happen?’” says parishioner Sharon O’Connor-Watters. “We are a congregation of seniors, so we might not be much good on ladders, but we’re known for our food! So, we decided to contribute meals for the volunteers on team-build days.”

St. George’s provided lunches and snacks for the building teams on 14 build days. Deacon Barbara Russell invited other parishes, including St. Peter, Cobourg, St. John the Evangelist, Port Hope and St. Andrew United, Grafton, to participate as well, contributing an additional six days of food.

Cathy Borowec, CEO of Habitat for Humanity Northumberland, estimates that St. George’s saved the teams over \$5,000 in meals. “It was great food and a real boost for the volunteer build teams,” she said.

St. George's also raised funds for the build. The church bought decorated shortbread cookies as part of Habitat's Thanksgiving cookie drive and handed them out at its Christmas bazaar to help promote the project. In December 2023, Deacon Russell's husband, Gary Russell, built a scale model of the townhomes in



*The winning gingerbread house.*

gingerbread, taking first prize at Habitat Northumberland's Gingerbread Festival fundraiser that year. Part of the prize was a gift certificate for food preparation, which Mr. Russell donated back to Habitat to provide meals for volunteer teams. St. George's Men's Breakfast group also ran three pancake brunches. Through these fundraising efforts, the parish raised more than \$10,000, in addition to the value of the meals provided. Individual parishioners also made contributions to the project.

While \$15,000 is already a significant contribution from a small rural parish, the value of St. George's contribution went far beyond money. "It wasn't just about the food or the money, but about building relationships - with volunteers, with Habitat, with other churches, with local representatives, with our neighbourhood," says Rev. Houldcroft. "When we were serving the food, we were also sitting down with the volunteers and having conversations. We got to meet some of the future residents, and it was such a privilege to hear them talk about what the project meant to them." The seven families moved into the townhomes this May.

While discussion of Canada's housing crisis often focuses on urban settings, Deacon Russell stresses that the need is great in rural areas as well. "The price of housing has really gone up. We have family homes being bought up for use as short-term rentals, creating a real shortage of affordable family housing. What's nice about the Baltimore build is that it's not some sprawling subdivision taking up arable land, but a compact and family-friendly community."

Eva Leca, another volunteer from St. George's, drives by the townhomes regularly. "Each time, it brings me a sense of joy that we helped make it happen," she says. "Talking about 'the housing crisis' or 'charitable giving' can be abstract, but this build is local and tangible. For me, and for our parish, it's important that we direct what we have to needs in our community."

Rev. Houldcroft says the parish is committed to being involved again, especially if there is another rural build. The project drew together not only those who regularly attend church but the wider community in support of Habitat for Humanity Northumberland, and the parish knows it can build on that wider support.

Asked for advice for other parishes, Deacon Russell says, "Know your strengths, and apply them to your passion." Rev. Houldcroft agreed, noting that churches can offer gathering places for people to come together and address the needs of the community. "We don't always use our spaces to their full potential in a way that strengthens communication and interrelatedness. But when you have a space, you can build conversations."



**By Elin Goulden**

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