

All Saints



UTS alumni altruism touches the heart of our city

BY KIMBERLEY FEHR

PHOTO: Dahlia Katz

East of the wealth and shining skyscrapers of downtown Toronto lies another world – the much-maligned intersection of Dundas and Sherbourne, referred to in the 1960s as skid row and not looking all that different today. This is a crossroads of a different Toronto, one where people might not know where they are going to sleep tonight and may not sleep at all. Some are hungry and worried if they'll have enough money to make rent or buy food. They are people experiencing homelessness and poverty, people living with traumatic brain injuries and possibly dealing with substance issues, survivors of human trafficking and other traumas – but that is not all they are. They are also people with hopes and dreams, great knowledge and talents, a wealth of life experience, amazing stories to tell and so much more, when you take the time to listen.

At Dundas and Sherbourne, they can find sanctuary in a daytime drop-in centre under the lofty vaulted ceilings of All Saints Church Community Centre, a corner of belonging amidst the concrete jungle of the big city. No matter where you've come from and what's happened in your life, people at the drop-in centre will let you in, greet you with a smile,

give you food and a place to rest, and over time, something equally vital: a sense of connection and belonging. In true Christian spirit, the doors are open and everyone is welcome.

When there's nowhere to go, there's All Saints

"We work with people who no one else will work with, because they've been restricted from drop-ins around the city," says **Reverend Canon Dr. Alison Falby '90**, who as the priest-director at All Saints has two all-consuming roles: overseeing all aspects of the Anglican church including Sunday service, as well as managing the non-profit drop-in centre. "They come to us because we are the only place that will take them. All Saints is low-barrier. You don't have to show ID or be drug-free, although we ask people not to use drugs while they are here."

With a social worker, nurse and harm reduction case manager on staff, as well as visiting support services to help people find housing, the church effectively brings vital services to the people who need them, who are often averse to institutions such as hospitals and medical clinics. The church offers food – they serve 800 meals a week – coffee, drop-in programs and harm-reduction services such as safe-injection kits and Nalaxone kits that save lives in the event of an overdose. People can lie down and sleep on mats provided by the church, a luxury not provided by any other day shelters in the city.

Everyone has valuable gifts to share

Alison is at the helm of what's been an almost gravitational pull of UTS alumni towards All Saints. In 2019, when Alison interviewed to become the priest-director, **Sam Robinson '93**, a commercial litigator at Stockwoods LLP, sat behind the table as a member of the All Saints' Board of Management. For over 17 years, **John Deacon '69** has been the man with the music, playing guitar and leading a weekly drop-in singing circle. **Hilary Masemann '95**, an art teacher in the process of becoming a psychotherapist, started a weekly art group for community members in 2022. When **Reverend Dr. Meredith Hawkins '84**, a professor of medicine and associate medical director in New York City, completed her divinity studies by working at St. Paul's Bloor Street, she brought members of the two congregations together to learn about each other.

"The traditional power dynamic that often creeps into charity is where the person dispensing the charity is the person with the power," says Alison. "In this community, we try to operate under a more mutual model where we both help each other. We do things together like making art or music so it becomes more relational. Being part of this community means realizing that the people in our community also have valuable gifts to share, and want to share them."

One participant, who lived on the TTC, said he didn't hear anyone say his name for three months, not until he came to All Saints, Alison recalls. Beyond the financial hardships, she says it's the isolation that comes from experiencing poverty and homelessness that is so difficult for people.

Inside, All Saints exudes a sense of respite amidst Gothic grandeur combined with Arts and Crafts flair, with towering vaulted ceilings, contrasting yellow and red bricks and luminous stained-glass windows, reflecting the church's more illustrious beginnings in 1872 when the neighbourhood was wealthier. Alison is gracious and welcoming and knows most of the community members by name. As the priest-in-charge, she is not separate from the community but deeply immersed in it. Before she became a priest in 2012 and began working at St. Martin's, Bay Ridges Church in Pickering, Alison was a historian with her doctorate in modern history from Oxford, and teaching at university. Now in lieu of teaching history, she is living it.

OPPOSITE PAGE: An almost gravitational pull of UTS alumni towards All Saints Church Community Centre: Sam Robinson '93, Hilary Masemann '95, Reverend Canon Dr. Alison Falby '90, Reverend Dr. Meredith Hawkins '84 and John Deacon '69.

BELOW: Whether leading Sunday service or simply serving coffee to drop-in visitors, Alison Falby is deeply immersed in the All Saints community.



PHOTO: Kimberley Fehr



Iraklis (Hercules) Pilatos (left) joins his long-time friend, John Deacon '69 (right), and other volunteers at the weekly drop-in music circle at All Saints Church Community Centre.

“Affluence is its own bubble. For me, All Saints is a bubble-breaking experience.”

—John Deacon '69

The sound of hope

When there was suddenly nowhere for people experiencing homelessness to go during the pandemic — the public places people often sought shelter in such as malls, libraries and cafés all shut their doors — All Saints was one of a few drop-in centres in the city that stayed open, and one of the only places people could access vital computer services. As an independent non-profit, All Saints was able to be agile. Alison became a voice advocating for the creation of more safe indoor spaces, and also regularly attended Downtown East Ontario Health Team briefings led by another UTS alum, **Dr. Matthew Muller '89**, the medical director of infection prevention and control at Unity Health Toronto.

After eight months of the pandemic, **John Deacon '69** felt a deep yearning to return to the weekly music circle he led at All Saints. In November 2020, a small group gathered out in the church garden, with people in masks. Throughout that pandemic winter, the snow would fly, John would play the guitar and people would gather and sing, voices raised to the heavens, the jingle of maracas and tambourines and improvised drums coming together. The sounds of singing can lift the soul up from even the darkest of places. To Alison, it sounded like hope, in a time when the pandemic extracted a painful toll on her community.

The day after Canadian musical icon Gordon Lightfoot passed away, a new man joined the circle and asked for Lightfoot songs. John said he didn't know them and the man said, "Well,

I do." The man smelled of alcohol and seemed drunk and John could see that his fingers were thickened from the cold, and wasn't sure the man would be able to play but handed him the guitar all the same. He played the song, *Beautiful*, and it was — everyone there became spellbound in awe at the moment.

The depths of one's humanity

"Affluence is its own bubble," says John. "For me, All Saints is a bubble-breaking experience. Sometimes you have to do things quite intentionally to make sure you don't become somewhat myopic in your consideration of what living is." John came to All Saints with the intention to make people's lives better and give them something, but found that what he gained is far more than he's ever given.

Now semi-retired, for many years John was an insurance broker by day as vice president at Deacon Insurance Agencies, in business with his brothers, **Fraser Deacon '71, Greg Deacon '74** and William Deacon (a total of 13 members of his family attended UTS, including his father **Fraser '35**). Aside from All Saints, John would often spend time with people experiencing homelessness and poverty, giving them what they needed, and making friends with them. He started a blog, *A Visitor's Guide to Street People, Many Without a Home*, at homelessguide.com, that features descriptions of people living on the street. He performed and spoke at rallies, but the most radical thing he did, and the most human, was simply being a friend to people who needed it. "My street friends would sometimes come by to my offices at the corner of Yonge and Adelaide for a visit and a coffee," he recalls. "I developed a reputation that if there were rough-looking people in the building, they were there looking for me."

Some of his friends from the street, such as Iraklis (Hercules) Pilatos, with whom he's been friends for 15 years, are like part of his family, knowing his wife and children. Before the pandemic, John started a lunch group to introduce people from their family church in Markham to people in the All Saints community. Together they'd have lunch at The Chef's House, the George Brown culinary school restaurant, and find common ground.

"I often ask myself, 'What is it about this particular experience that I see as fundamental to living and my life?'" John says. "It's an expression of worship but there's more to it than just trying

to be magnanimous to people who have less than I have. It's something that stirs the soul, at a level that's far deeper than anything else, and something I discover about the depths of one's humanity."

Do what you believe in

On a Tuesday morning in January, as the soulful music of songs like *Hallelujah* and *Blowing in the Wind* fills the vast All Saints Church interior, a core group of about 12 regulars gather around two tables in the church's nave for the weekly art program created by **Hilary Masemann '95**. Playful banter and creativity flow as they paint, draw and make jewellery and other art projects – wherever their passion takes them. Hilary helps with teaching, encouragement and supplies. With other volunteers now on board, she's not there every week now which means people are excited to see her – and it shows.

Hilary was an art teacher for 12 years with the Toronto District School Board, and before that a potter, specializing in functional porcelain such as teapots and bowls with a Scandinavian influence. Pandemic burnout and having a young child left her looking for something deeper, and she began working towards her master's in psychotherapy. Hilary hails from a UTS family – all five Masemann sisters went to UTS including **Charlotte '89, Rosemary '02, Bronwen '02** and **Alison '90**, who as an F1 (grade 7) student became inseparable friends with Alison Falby – the two Alisons.

"I feel like I've known Alison Falby my entire life," says Hilary. "I still have lots of really good friends from UTS, and have the sense that my sisters' friends from UTS are people I can trust – people with integrity."

From her sister, Hilary had been moved to hear about Alison Falby's inspiring work at All Saints, and in 2021, a friend's death at the age of 47 became a watershed moment for Hilary. "Why am I not doing the things that I believe in?" she asked herself. "And taking more risks and doing things that make me feel nervous? If I'm watching something and I feel like there's something I could help with, why am I not helping? Because life is really short."

Art speaks without words

She called Alison offering to start an art program at All Saints and one Tuesday morning in spring 2022, Hilary, Alison and All Saints staff moved tables and supplies outside into the spring sunshine

and the art program began. Soon, the program became a mainstay of the All Saints drop-in.

Art is a way of speaking when you can't find the words. She recalls one participant, a human-trafficking survivor, saying at the start, "I won't be able to make much." After months in the program, they developed impressive artistic skills. Last June, All Saints held an art show at the church where the artists sold their work. "The art show was really amazing because it was a big deal for the participants," she says. "We had it catered, and had live music and speeches. And it made people feel like they're being known for something good."

Her work at All Saints has fundamentally changed her perspective. "I think people don't understand that people who live on the streets can't sleep at night because it's too dangerous," she says. "Many suffer from psychosis simply because they don't get enough sleep." That people come into All Saints and sleep is a testament to the sense of safety that people have there, she says. Then there are the small acts of kindness she sees every time she visits, describing how staff gently set a tray of food down beside someone who is sleeping, so they don't miss the meal.

"Now when I pass Dundas and Sherbourne on the streetcar, instead of looking out the window and feeling sorry for people or horrified by the poverty, I look out the window for people I know," says Hilary. "This work removes the barrier between me and other people – it's helped me to be a better person and deepen my humanity and compassion."

Hilary Masemann '95 (centre) with members of the All Saints community, Feshea Nagatu (left) and My-ha Trina (right), at a session of the drop-in art program she created.





Meredith worked with All Saints, bringing congregations of both Anglican churches together for prayer walks to share spiritual practices.

“Together we would set out from All Saints and Alison would point out important places in their neighbourhood and we would go from place to place, praying for the people on the street and to soothe the violence in our world,” Meredith recalls. “For both congregations, the prayer walks created a chance to connect with people with very different experiences and backgrounds, and yet, we’re all united in faith, and very alive in it.”

While it was a cold and stormy winter, she recalls it seemed as though every time they had prayer walks, the clouds would part and the sun would come shining through.

Many ways to give and serve

Now Meredith is back in New York City, working as a physician, teaching medical students and serving as a priest on weekends in Toronto and New York City. In Toronto, she supports the rapidly growing congregation of Christ Church St. James in Etobicoke, which serves an influx of immigrants to the area and provides food to nearly 200 families with its weekly food bank. In New York, she divides her time between the Church of the Heavenly Rest on the Upper East Side, which she attended for many years, and a lively evening service complete with a jazz band at All Angels’ Church on the Upper West Side, which serves a similar community to All Saints, where many people face housing precarity.

The lines between her two vocations are blurring. “Often end-of-life conversations turn to shame, guilt, sorrow, loss and even anger and we haven’t necessarily been trained as doctors to deal with that. People aren’t always going to ask for a priest or a rabbi but I’m wearing a stethoscope and that means they let me in and we talk.” When she asks if they’d like her to pray for them, no patient has ever said no. “There are many different ways of giving and serving and the spiritual area is one that we cannot underestimate, in my opinion,” she says.

The spirit at work

As a member of All Saints’ Board of Management, **Sam Robinson ’93** noticed a phenomenon – just when they needed something at All Saints, someone would show up and offer help in exactly the way they needed it. “You really felt that the Holy Spirit was at work in that place,” he said. He became involved because his spouse, Molly, was

While completing her divinity studies work at St. Paul’s Bloor Street, Reverend Dr. Meredith Hawkins ‘84, brought St Paul’s and All Saints community members together for prayer walks, where they deepened their understanding of each other.

Connection and understanding

For nearly 25 years, **Meredith Hawkins ’84** felt a calling to the priesthood, but she already had a demanding career as a professor of medicine and associate director of the Einstein-Mt. Sinai Regional Diabetes Research Center, doing groundbreaking research on diabetes caused by malnutrition in developing countries such as India and Uganda. Taking three years off to go to seminary school seemed like it would make no sense, but she says, “I couldn’t deny the calling because I knew in my heart it was true – there’s a beauty about doing it later in life because it makes you realize that there’s something new that you can start to pour your life into.” In 2019, she took a sabbatical to attend seminary at University of Toronto’s Wycliffe College, which gave her the sense of feeling very grounded, down the street from two very formative institutions in her life – UTS and U of T’s Temerty Faculty of Medicine. She also took the opportunity to meet up for lunch with old friend **Donald Ainslie ’84**, who was the principal and philosophy professor at University College next door, delving deep into philosophical, theological ideas.

Then the pandemic hit and the border closed, enabling her to stay in Toronto and complete her divinity studies working at St. Paul’s Bloor Street, a church that serves a large and diverse congregation up the street from All Saints. Meredith knew Alison years ago from church, and their families are close friends. For her thesis,

volunteering at the church's drop-in program for sex workers – one of many innovative programs created there over the years.

During Sam's tenure, aside from weathering the beginnings of a global pandemic, he contributed to two major accomplishments: a vital building restoration for the church, which was a designated heritage building in Toronto – and he helped hire Alison.

When he joined the board in 2014, the building, not unlike UTS before our building renewal, needed work. For the new roof, they secured funding from the Diocese of Toronto, but they wanted to take advantage of construction to do other much-needed work on the building. An architect friend of Sam's put in a bid to the Toronto Heritage Grant Program to restore the church's yellow and red brick masonry. "The reaction of the city was phenomenal," he recalls. "They said, 'We've been waiting for you to make an application.' The grant they gave the church was \$101,000, one of the largest under that program at the time."

The only issue was that All Saints had to match it. The church started a fundraising campaign called Brick by Brick and managed to exceed the amount they needed. "The architect told me, 'That chimney is standing out of faith alone,'" Sam recalls.

With the work on the building completed between 2015 and 2018, the church also needed a new priest.

An all-consuming job

Sam remembers looking up to Alison at UTS, in the way younger students often admire the older ones. Who knew the next time they'd meet it would be the interview process for All Saints, with Sam behind the table. "All Saints is a job for a priest unlike any other church in Toronto – it's all-consuming," Sam says. Alison was the one All Saints had been waiting for, a fully formed priest and an extremely good administrator.

"All Saints Church is very real – it scratches through all of the varnish and the veneer in our society," says Sam. "You can go into All Saints on any weekday morning and cross into a part of our city that is very close geographically to UTS but worlds away from our experience. That opportunity to cross through the divide or even get rid of the divide altogether and actually help is probably why UTS alumni have been drawn there."

Challenges fuel innovation

Alison's work continues to build on All Saints' history of innovation. The church broke ground in the seventies and eighties, offering drop-in services and later subsidized housing to single people while advocating for changes in provincial housing policy. In the nineties, All Saints was a pioneer in harm reduction, creating groundbreaking programs that mitigated the impact of drug use on both the people using drugs and the community.

Today the church continues to be involved with ongoing research into homelessness issues. A recent project by Unity Health and St. Michael's MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions brought expanded health services with a holistic model to the All Saints drop-in, providing greater care to people who need it while researching how people access support services. All Saints is also becoming involved in research on crystal methamphetamine use, a rising epidemic on Toronto streets.

At All Saints, charity is not something you give but something you share. This year, the Anglican Church recognized Alison's enduring commitment, elevating her to the status of honorary Canon, but nothing has really changed. She is still deeply immersed in the everyday struggles and triumphs at All Saints, stopping to talk and share a laugh with everyone who enters the church. "It's a church for people of all religions and no religion," she says. "People come here seeking something – maybe a sense of safety and sacredness, a sense of belonging and community. All of these are spiritual things."

Whatever they seek, Alison and All Saints are ready to give them what they need and more, a small corner of belonging in the heart of our city. ■

"All Saints Church scratches through all of the varnish and veneer in our society."

– Sam Robinson '93

When Alison Falby interviewed to become the new priest-director in 2019, commercial litigator Sam Robinson '93 was behind the table on the All Saints' Board of Management, helping to hire her.

