

A History of Our Handbells at First-St. Andrew's United Church

and was invited to play at Expo while there. In 2004, the group helped organize the International Handbell Symposium in Toronto which attracted over 600 ringers from around the world. We were proud that our conductor, Barbara Plante, was one of the Massed Choir conductors who rehearsed and conducted all 600 ringers on one of the pieces in the final concert at the Air Canada Centre.



By far, the most significant achievement of the handbell choir at FSA was to organize Ontario's first Handbell Festival and to develop the Ontario Guild of English



Handbell Ringers (OGEHR), both in 1985. Similar guilds have since been organized in other provinces. These guilds interact with the Handbell Musicians of America, Handbells of Great Britain, and similar organizations in Japan, Australia, and Korea. The Ontario Guild is most active in promoting handbell ringing in Ontario and

organizing provincial handbell events. At the Ontario Handbell Festival in 2013, OGEHR honoured Barbara Plante with a lifetime membership for her work in developing the Guild and for her 40 years of contributions to it. The current handbell director, Terry Head, is also heavily involved with OGEHR as a member of its executive, as a conductor at handbell festivals, and as a leader of many handbell workshops. Over the years, many Laudamus ringers have served on its executive.



Laudamus Bells is an active and caring group of ringers with close friendships and enthusiastically welcome new members. Handbell ringing is a lovely way to make music with a sound that is heavenly and is a beautiful addition to any worship service. It is the ultimate in teamwork with all ringers having equal importance. Handbell music will ring out at First-St. Andrew's for many years to come.

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The music of handbells has enriched the ministry of music at First-St. Andrew's United Church since 1970. The unique sound and appearance of the 61 bronze bells has been an important addition to the life and worship of the church, both for those who hear them and those who play them. The bells were cast in the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London, England, an old and venerable company whose history of bell production dates to 1420. Proceeds from the children's opera, *The Selfish Giant*, allowed Barrie Cabena, the Director of Music in 1970, to order the first three octaves (36 bells) and travel to London to take delivery of the bells personally.



The first handbell choir was directed by Merrie Young. In 1973, Barbara Plante began directing the group, named the Ladies' Handbell Choir. During the 1970s, Helen Heller directed a youth handbell group for several years, followed by Barbara Plante directing the youth handbell choir. In 1985, Helen Inch began a second adult group of men and women, called the Mixed Peal-ers, which continued until 1998. The youth handbell choir had ended several years earlier.



In the early 1990s, the Ladies' Handbell Choir changed its name to Laudamus

Bells. Barbara Plante continued to direct this group until her retirement in 2013 when the congregation celebrated her 40 years of outstanding service to the FSA music program. Over the 40 years, she contributed an invaluable service to the musical growth and excellence of the group. From 2013-2016, Paul Merritt, the Director of Music, conducted the group until his retirement. He also exacted a high level of excellence in handbell ringing. The current Director of Music, Terry Head, who has many years of experience in directing handbells, began conducting the group in 2016 and has continued to challenge the ringers with new techniques and artistry.



During the 1970s and 1980s, the number of handbells gradually increased from the original 36 bells to the present 5-octave set of 61 bells. Handbells do not require a great deal of maintenance, but they do occasionally need repair or adjustment. Bob Plante maintained the handbell set from 1973-2008. From 2008 until the present, Wes Sole has maintained them.



Over the years, all of the handbell choirs have made significant contributions to the life of FSA and to the community, but Laudamus Bells has been the most active. The group has had many ringers of long-

standing service over its existence and has played for weddings, funerals, nursing homes, numerous groups and organizations including The Canadian Club, other churches in London and beyond, and once for Sir Edmund Hilary. The group has often taken part in the 3-day Festival of the Ontario Guild of English Handbell Ringers (OGEHR).



At FSA, as well as taking part in hundreds of Sunday services and special services over the years, Laudamus Bells has played numerous concerts. For many years, the group played a 30-minute concert to open the Holly Bazaar and a 30-minute Advent Noon Hour concert. In recent years, the group has also played a Lenten Noon Hour concert. The group has also provided congregational lunches and dinners for Middlesex Presbytery and visiting musical groups.



The congregation has always supported the group wholeheartedly when needed. When the group decided to attend the International Handbell Symposium in Birmingham, England in 2000, the congregation gave overwhelming support towards fundraising. The group had previously attended an International Handbell Symposium in Vancouver in 1986