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UNITED CHURCHES PLAY HOST TO CALGARY ARTS AND CULTURE SCENE



Hillhurst United Church hosts plays and was a venue for this year's Sled Island music festival. Photo by Indrani Kar/OpenFile

Reported by [Indrani Kar](#)
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Trends suggest church attendance is declining, the number of self-identified Atheists are increasing and religious values are being replaced by secular ones. Yet one branch of local churches may be bucking these trends, by blending religious and secular activities, while breathing life into Calgary's arts and culture scene.

While the [United Church of Canada](#) plays a pivotal role in the spiritual life of many Calgarians, it has also been a leader in spearheading progressive action on a variety of issues including embracing plurality, inclusiveness and diversity, recognizing same-sex marriages and allowing women to become ministers within the church. Some local United Churches also do a great deal to support Calgary arts and culture.

[Knox United Church](#) has made a name for itself bringing in bigger name artists such as [Billy Bragg](#), [Harry Manx](#) and [The Sadies](#) to play in its impressive space. The church also boasts a strong in-house [music program](#). In addition, Knox has its own resident theatre company, [The Knox Centre Theatre Collective](#), which specializes in producing "plays with a social justice theme." The church also opens its doors for the public to take part in daily [self-guided labyrinth walks](#).

A few blocks away, the [Central United Church](#) takes a different approach to cultivating culture. This church supports local, home-grown talent and initiatives such as [Local Library](#), an "all-ages, inclusive, arts and culture space" that hosts all-ages music shows, visual arts and workshops to showcase emerging artists of various stripes.

"We have a healthy congregation and we're not dependent on events for revenue generation, so that gives us a chance to work with groups we can grow with long-term," says Jerrod Bitango, pastor of Urban Community Outreach. "We have the space and lots of arts organizations need it — our biggest criteria for who gets to use the space is whether there's a values-match, not whether we agree on everything."

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So far it seems to have worked out — as a vibrant part of the downtown **Cultural District**, Central gets its pick of arts and culture groups who click with them in terms of developing community partnerships. Connections with the community have largely happened organically, and support is concentrated on groups and projects that may be innovative and groundbreaking, but not always economically viable. At a recent **First Thursday** event, **La Caravan Dance Theatre** put on a free public show in the church for those taking in a bit of culture in the downtown core.

"We're into everything from anarchist movie nights to experimental dance to creative writing workshops that include people with developmental disabilities," Bitango says. "We intentionally want this to be a space of interaction with the tension of different groups mixing, yet ultimately developing respectful friendships."

Networking and cross-pollination of ideas is a by-product of such groups mixing. **Thrive Calgary** recently hosted a workshop at Central called **Creativity as an Economic Force**, which showcased various local examples of groups that are promoting culture in Calgary successfully and inclusively, including Local Library.

While Central has collaborated with festivals like **Sled Island** as a venue for shows both this year and in the past, **Hillhurst United Church** provided venue space for this year's festivities for the first time.

"We decided we'd try this out with them and it worked out quite well," says Marsha Mah Poy, office administrator for Hillhurst United. "They were very respectful."

Hillhurst United supports the arts via the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community as well. As an **Affirming Ministry**, Hillhurst United hosted the play **Heterophobia** in conjunction with this year's **Fairy Tales Film Festival**. Reverend John Pentland also cites their involvement in providing space for an art exhibition in collaboration with the **Calgary Drop-in and Rehab Centre** as part of the church's commitment in supporting community arts programs.

"Actively supporting arts and culture in Calgary reflects our core values of spirituality, social justice and radical hospitality, and it's one of the ways we walk our talk in the community," says Mah Poy.

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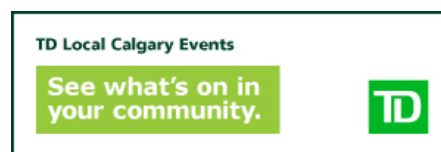


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