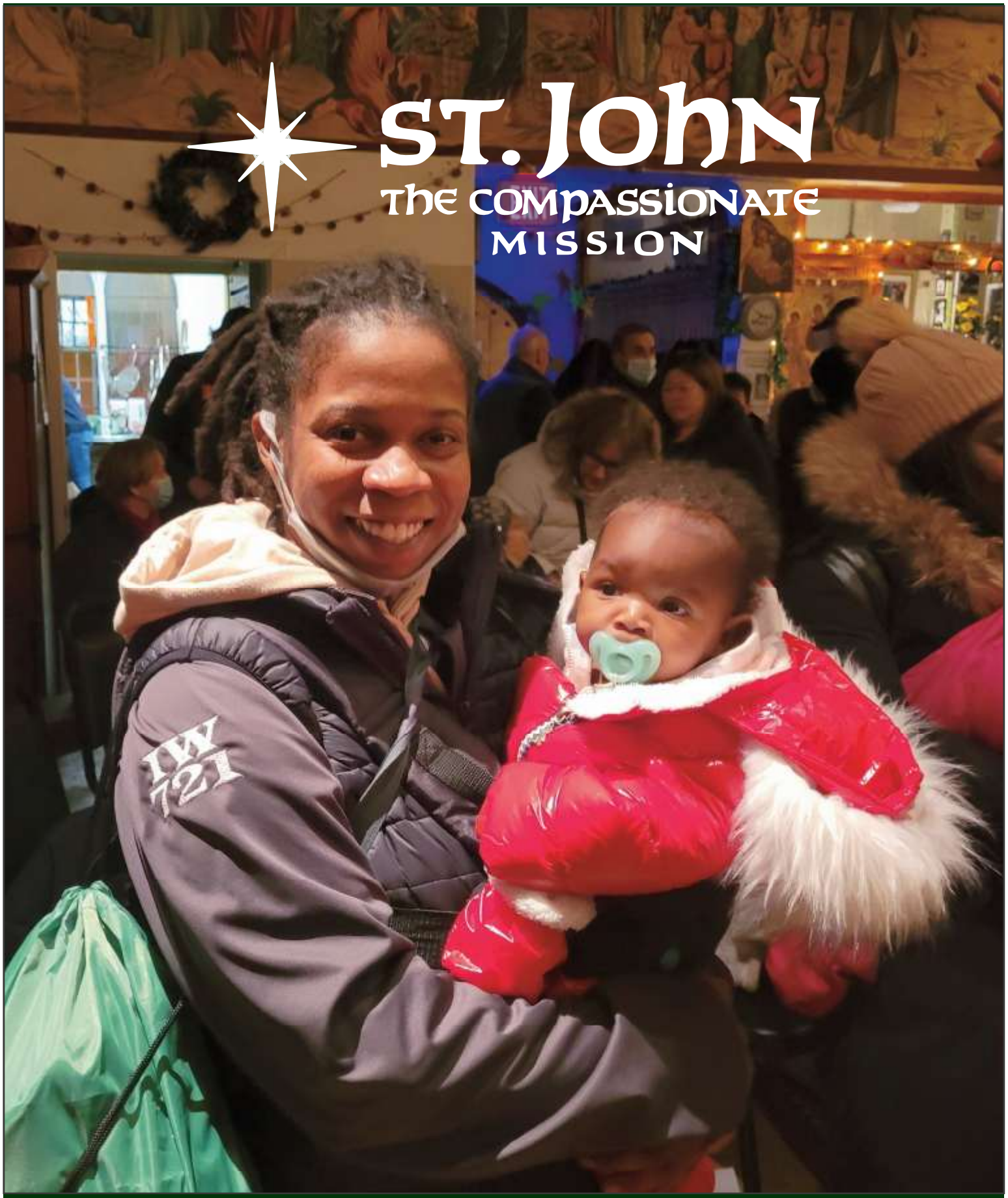

St. John

The Compassionate Mission

Newsletter Christmas 2025

"What mysteries beyond mind and speech!"

Generous with our emptiness

Nativity is about gifts. Or that's what we're taught to believe, which isn't a bad thing.

If we don't become a gift now, then when? This is the time to do it. Waiting on this doesn't make much sense, and postpones the moment. If we miss it, we're left with regrets.

We all want to bring joy to others out of who we are. Now's the time to give it a try.

However, we can't become a gift before we know – or rather we find out – what we lack. To receive, amid our poverty, the richness of goodness, and the beauty of truth. To be filled first, so we don't become an empty gift for others, an empty bag with not much value. To be received with gratitude and not wasted together with other artificial gifts. To untie our empty bag and keep it open, so we can be filled and healed.

Christ is coming, and he fills in us what we lack. He becomes food for the hungry, fresh water for the thirsty, forgiveness for a hardened heart, and light for those who live in darkness. He becomes a son for the suffering mother, and a father for the orphan. He becomes joy for the anxious, and peace for a violent heart. He fills in us the emptiness we try to avoid out of disbelief.

The emptiness, we try to fill with artificial water.

So, we become food for the hungry, and fresh water for the thirsty. Father for those who are abandoned, and sons and daughters for the lonely elderly. Light for the blind who cannot take the stairs at the Mission, and peace for a distressed heart who can't sleep at night because of the cold of the street.

What do we really lack for becoming joy for others? The time before Nativity is generous with our emptiness, and gentle with our wounds. It helps us to become a gift for others once we recognize what we lack, and we stop hiding it.

We'll learn that we lack nothing. Becoming a gift for others fills us with every good thing. This grows and enlarges our heart, over and over again.

Christ is born!

— Father Nicolaie

St. John's Mission: a fulfilling experience

It was not only an honor, but it was also fulfilling for my son, Nahom Misganaw Solomon, and me to volunteer at St. John's in 2024–25. The Mission gives comfort for vulnerable individuals in different ways: basic services such as food, counseling, and prayer to those in need, and creating opportunities for youth, residents of Toronto, and anyone interested in volunteering.

Visitors like me can contribute to the community, too. As volunteers, my son and I have enjoyed our time as we worked with the dedicated team of the Mission, and shared experiences and skills.

St. John's is a place where human beings get services for their body and spirit, irrespective of their background. Although it is in an Orthodox Church, it serves people from all walks of life. Father Nicolaie's counseling service remains valuable for those in need. The spiritual aspect of the Mission reminds me of my childhood upbringing.

Especially, Brother Luke's lifestyle brings memories of the lives of the Ethiopian hermits and monks I knew when I was a child. They lived for others, and I witnessed that in Brother Luke.

Nahom continues to be part of this amazing team, which is welcoming, kind-hearted, and down-to-earth.

My son and I will always remember our rewarding experiences at the Mission.

— Misganaw Solomon Mengistu

ST. JOHN
THE COMPASSIONATE MISSION

info@stjohnsmission.org • stjohnsmission.org
416-466-1357 • Facebook stjcm

155 Broadview Avenue, Toronto, ON M4M 2E9
Registered charity #893281832RR0001

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More than a meal: a Ugandan view of warmth, love, and generosity at Good Neighbours Drop-In

At Good Neighbours Drop-In, the Scarborough affiliate of St. John's Mission, the food is plentiful, warm, and thoughtfully prepared. The commitment to both taste and nutrition is evident: these meals are not simply 'free food,' but wholesome, carefully-made dishes that people genuinely look forward to.

What stood out most to me when I first entered the door as a volunteer was the warm welcome and invitation to join in a meal. I noted that regardless of whether someone was a first-time visitor or a regular, each person received a similar portion. There was no hierarchy, no special treatment – everyone was equal. This equality is more than a practical detail; it reflects respect and human dignity.

Generosity extends beyond the first serving, as visitors are often encouraged to take second helpings, not out of politeness, but because the food being served is enough. This mirrors the food culture in many African communities, where meals are prepared in abundance and shared communally. There, the focus is on ensuring everyone eats to their fill.

At Good Neighbours in Scarborough, I felt that same spirit: the invitation to 'come, eat, and be satisfied.' I witnessed a family created and bound together by a shared meal!

Being a God-fearing person, I was humbled by the moment of prayer before the meal begins. This is not a performance, but a heartfelt expression of gratitude, acknowledging God as the provider of both food and fellowship. In that quiet moment, the food is more than something prepared by volunteers. It becomes a gift from God, a symbol of love, care, and grace. For many, this spiritual recognition is profoundly meaningful. It connects nourishment to a larger purpose and reassures visitors they are seen, cared for, and provided for.

Coming from Africa, I immediately recognized echoes of my own cultural practices. In many African communities, sharing food is a treasured central social act. Meals are cooked in large pots, and guests, including passersby, are welcomed generously to share a meal. No one is shamed for taking a second helping. Eating together strengthens friendships, builds trust, and sustains community.

At Good Neighbours, that same communal value is evident. The drop-in does more than provide meals – it creates a space where people belong, where everyone is treated with dignity, and where shared moments of gratitude and prayer reinforce a sense of home.

The food program embodies more than nourishment. It builds trust, creates a welcoming space, and models generosity in a tangible way. Eating at Good Neighbours is not just about satisfying hunger; it is an affirmation of humanity, belonging, and respect. In a society that often challenges the dignity of marginalized people, it is profoundly humbling to be welcomed, fed, and spiritually included.

Supporting Good Neighbours is therefore about more than filling plates. It is about sustaining a culture of care and humanity, showing that even in a busy city, people value connection, generosity, and community. The food offered here expresses love, warmth, inclusion, and hope. Visitors leave fed not only in body but also in spirit, becoming part of a family where a full plate comes with full acceptance.

— Faith

Our 'needs list' – can you help?

- sugar, jam, pancake mix, syrup
- oil, herbs, spices, breakfast cereal
- pasta, rice, lentils, dry chickpeas
- XL disposable gloves, men's socks, winter hats and gloves
- bleach, laundry detergent, dish detergent

You Can Help!

Volunteer

- Volunteers are the heart of what we do at St. John's
- Volunteer by yourself, or as a group
- Visit, phone or e-mail us to find out more, or tap the Volunteer button at the top of our web site

Donate goods

- Check the 'Needs list' on page 5, and our web site

Donate by cheque, or cash

- Tax receipts are issued, as we are a Canadian registered charity

Donate on-line

- Make a no-fee donation using PayPal, single or recurring; pay by credit card, or your PayPal account
- Tap Donate now at the top of our web site
- CanadaHelps can also be used, but with a fee

Donate securities

- Plan donations in your will or life insurance policy
- Donate RRSP, RRIF, TFSA, stocks, real estate
- Donate through endowments, donor-advised funds, private foundations

Donate through your employer

- Your employer may offer (matching) donations via payroll deductions, and group volunteering

Visit St. John's Bakery

- "Award-winning non-profit social enterprise producing Toronto's best organic sourdough breads and sweets," 153 Broadview Ave., stjohnsbakery.com

Visit St. John's Eco Market

- Support a community dedicated to reducing waste and inequality, 740 Queen St. East

Christmas is love indefatigable

Christmas is God becoming one of us, so each person can became like God! This gives the universal sense of the indefatigable value and rights of each person, from conception to natural death. Made in the image of God, each of us is a mystery of infinite value, and unrepeatable. This is what happens and can never change with the birth of Jesus. This season calls us back to what matters most.

This is the only reality that can address the deepest longing in every heart, rich or poor. It is with the poor that God incarnate becomes solidarity with each human person. We're called to reverently care for each other, especially those closest to God.

Thanks to your caring partnership, young parents like Lucia and Jose can provide a joyful holiday for their child while rebuilding their life in Canada. A grieving homeless person who lost his best friend to drugs can find comfort and healing. Refugees, and any newcomer to Canada, can experience belonging in our house of hospitality.

Because of you, St. John's can host meaningful events like St. Nicholas feast day and share with the larger community real spiritual and material food, love, and joy. Through your generosity, our larger neighborhood feels seen and cared for – not only through a meal or gift card, but the experience of genuine love and compassion.

Your support at this time of year is like a warm hug and a gentle smile at just the right time for someone who is feeling lonely or unseen. Thank you!

What is the hope of the poor?

The hope of the poor is the gift of peace that is received within the heart, when one is hungry, naked, or thirsty. It's the gift of communion, when one is isolated and in distress. It's the joy of presence when one is walking on the streets of Toronto alone on a rainy night.

Like Hector, a native homeless person. He walks all night, only to arrive radiant at the Mission, early in the morning, for a cup of coffee and a cigarette, if he can find a brother ready to spare one for him. Many are the wounds of poverty, but the gift of hope heals them all in the heart of the one who is given to see the beautiful reflection of one's soul and the face of his brother who is deprived of both. The gift of the poor is the Beatitudes.

Laura lives in subsidized housing near the Mission. An army of social workers and nurses try to make sure Laura takes her schizophrenia medicine. Amid this, Laura buys coffee cards as Christmas gifts for people she knows. She buys milk for coffee when we happen to run out of it. People like Laura preserve and nourish the beauty of life when their life hasn't been kind to them. Like Jenny, who offers forgiveness for her brother. She prays for him early in the morning in the chapel, even though he died unreconciled with her, after killing the joy of youth in her.

The hope of the poor is their tears. Tears that do not hate, but heal the wounds of community. When they pray and when they are not listened to, the tears are gracious. The tears are a free offering that we receive many times at prayer, and when another brother dies before his time.

The hope of the poor is their suffering. Because nothing changes in their lives. And yet they and we hope that something changes in us. It's the hope of Marco, whom we see every few months. He comes to visit us with frozen hands, in need of food and clothing. He's unable to receive anything because he falls asleep every couple of minutes, his head on the table. We hear his prayer when, taken down by addictions, he kneels in gratitude in the chapel, knowing that he cannot change. His heart is full of forgiveness for others and for himself, and it makes place to a presence that is ready to forgive also. Even though defeated by the modern illness, he never loses his sense of humor, remembering that his youth is like an eagle.

The hope of the poor is Eli, who needs a pen to write her sad poems, but has no money. When she finds $20 on the ground, she gives it to another hungry person because it didn't belong to her. Moments later, beside a park bench, she finds the pen she dreamed of. The same Eli once got an unexpected tax refund. The first thing she bought was a pizza gift card for a poor family, after she saw them waiting in line for food. She remained hungry.

Today's economics of daily living in Canada make no sense. People are suffering, and more are going to do so. The number of people losing jobs or houses is rising, as is the number of broken families. No one can tell them that everything is going to be okay, because that would be a lie.

If the poor had a voice, it would speak of their presence in the hell that others create, the hell to which they're accustomed. They can witness and describe a life not conditioned by its quality, or its success or failure. It's a gifted life, but the gift brings about another gift: the gift of being, which is a presence for others. The poor can overcome loneliness of the soul, even while being forgotten at the margins. Forgotten by a humanity inattentive to its own pain, to its own brothers. This same humanity can discover, in need, its own forgiveness, kept as a secret in the heart of the poor. The hope of humanity is the prayer and smile of the poor, who are never set apart by the lack of faith, skepticism, and bitterness of modern man.

The hope of the poor is seen in the new life of Miquel. When his work papers expired, he volunteered, helping his homeless brothers and sisters . . . starting at five a.m.

The hope of the poor is John, who suffers in silence. After graduating from a famous Toronto university, he found out that nobody needed him. He lost hope of a decent life. He lost respect for himself. Then he discovered respect for others, and found patience serving every angry brother who is tired and bitter about his own poverty.

Who doesn't need strength? Who doesn't cry on their own grave, when no one else even knows they're gone? But when we know them, they can touch with hope the heart of every unfaithful soul. When embraced, they do not spare any kindness. When asked, they never fail to point to the intertwined fabric of life, with which they sow a beautiful garment for a naked humanity that has lost its own clothes. They cover us with hope because they're the hope for a suffering life.

— Father Nicolaie

FACES OF ST. JOHN'S

Top left — Christmas choir at the Mission. *Top, middle, and bottom right* — In November, we honored the remarkable service and commitment of our volunteers, community members, and program participants – an afternoon of gratitude and joy welcomed more than 180 people. The presence of MP Julie Dabrusin, a long-time friend and supporter of the Mission, underlined the value society places on volunteer work. *Middle left* — Michael and Christina, married November 12 at St. John's Mission.