



Westmount Park United Church
takes the environment to heart

Description

Rev. Neil Whitehouse discusses the history of the United Church, spirituality, and the environment

By Irwin Rapoport

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[Westmount Park United Church](#), located at 4695 de Maisonneuve Blvd at the corner of Lansdowne Avenue, has been a bulwark of the Westmount community ever since it started as a Methodist church on the site in 1887. Generations of Westmounters and people from many parts of the city have gathered to worship and be as one in the church community. The wonderful stone building continues to house many community organizations.

The congregation is led by **Rev. Neil Whitehouse**, BSc (Liverpool) BA (Cantab), who has more than thirty years of experience as a minister in churches large and small in Canada, the United Kingdom, student chaplaincy, working with non-profit groups, youth organizations, and social action. Trained as a Methodist minister at Cambridge University and central London, Whitehouse moved to Montreal in 2001 and was received as a United Church of Canada minister. Since 2009, he has worked as a certified massage therapist, which he says allows him to offer the tradition of the church with a “holistic and creative outlook.”



Westmount Park United Church

I first met Neil several years ago at a rally to protect the Technoparc wetlands and wilderness area, and we have been colleagues in the good fight ever since. Neil has been front and centre in the fight to protect many wilderness areas and part of the movement to stop the REM commuter rail system.

Westmount Park United Church has hosted many events and lectures on issues such as the Technoparc, Meadowbrook, and L'Anse a l'Orme, which were well attended and helped bring many in Westmount up-to-date on the struggle to protect these critical areas from development and increase environmental awareness.

Through my contacts with Neil, I also became very aware of his status as a community leader and as a minister who deeply cares about his church and its members. Many recall how the church, to raise funds, hosted events where classic silent films were shown accompanied by live music.

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– Rev. Neil Whitehouse

Rev. Whitehouse discussed the role of the Westmount Park United Church in the community, his take on faith and spirituality, the concept of the **Wild Church**, and other matters in the following interview:

WM: *How would you describe your role as an environmental leader and the environmental mission of the church?*

Whitehouse: Many Christians find that their experience of God is in the midst of nature. Westmount Park Church is by the park, so most members have experienced this for themselves. It was easy to introduce **Faith in Nature** activities as an authentic expression of the mission of the church. People have found it enriching and liberating.

I have always been biophilic, a lover of nature, and found that which I call God, in nature too. I trained as a zoologist and became a minister soon after, so science and religion have always gone together for me. The science tells us there is a crisis of human impacts on the natural world and our systems of production have never been designed to accept there are limits to growth. It is a new era when this fact cannot be avoided, and we are alive during a paradigm shift that is as great as the agrarian or industrial revolutions. Fortunately, our capacity for change is better



than ever but self-interested forces are slowing our response when we need to speed up.



New plant donations as part of the plant re-homing project

WM: *How did COVID-19 impact the church and its community?*

Whitehouse: The pandemic hit hard, and we are still recovering from a loss of activities and income. The **Montreal Camera Club** and **Westmount Beavers/Cubs** are regular users, alongside **Contactivity**, **Garderie Fun Academy** and **Westmount Music Therapy**. The church and Centre Greene are the two foremost community buildings in Westmount, along with the YMCA.

We missed one service at the start of the pandemic, and then we started online services. Today we have hybrid services – in-person and online. The online services kept the community together. It was a very important tonic for everybody to connect by Zoom. Our numbers at services in the church are similar to pre-COVID attendance. Religious communities are reflecting on the long-term impacts of having some people on Zoom. Being online has expanded our reach, especially for some who cannot attend services in person.

WM: *What led you to become a minister, and what are your takes on religion and spirituality in today's world?*

Whitehouse: I studied cell biology at the University of Liverpool and I went straight from university to a national job in youth work for the Methodist Church. When I came to Montreal, it was obvious to join the **United Church of Canada**



, as it is a fusion of three key denominations — **Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian.**

Becoming a minister was natural for me. At first, I thought I would be turned down because I was the first candidate offered to be trained as a gay candidate. It surprised me that the church accepted me. All of my life has been involved in the church. As a teenager, I was involved in a church youth group when all my peers took the first opportunity of leaving church culture. I've always been a sort of counter-culture guy.

The gospels give a rich picture of Jesus, but one feature across all four is how he avoided spoon-feeding people. He encouraged people to think for themselves. He had a deep conviction that people knew God themselves and he was empowering people to grow their self-awareness on the condition that God was present to everybody. You can see that in the way he told the parables – he expects people to wrestle with the riddle and find answers for themselves.

WM: How have you evolved and changed as a minister?

Whitehouse: It is extremely challenging but very fulfilling. The variety is fascinating – sharing peoples' intimate and special moments, and being a focus for creating a sense of community, which is more and more needed today as we are increasing our individuality. We're also saying, as a church, that community includes nature – the connectivity of nature matches the connectivity of human beings and the reality that separation is a problem. It's a paradigm shift, and we have to recognize that we share the planet more respectfully or we die. I think we are going in the right direction. We try to make a home for all, not just for humans. That's a phrase I propagate!

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– Rev. Neil Whitehouse

WM: Can you tell us more about the history of the United Church of Canada (UCC)?

Whitehouse: In England, the UCC is the Methodist Church. The UCC is unique in Canada and is the fusion of the three key denominations – Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian, which happened in 1925. The history of the Westmount Park Church is interesting because it's one of the few churches where the local one has this blend of three traditions. When you come into the church by the main entrance in the lobby, by the bell tower base, there is a plaque which has the dates of the different communities that have made Westmount Park United Church what it is today.

WM: The church has a beautiful stone facade and blends in perfectly with the neighbourhood, and is adjacent to a major entrance of Westmount Park. How did the current building evolve into the way it is today?

Whitehouse: In 1887, the Methodists bought the land at the corner of swampy ground that was not good for agriculture. They built a wooden shack – we have a picture of it. In 1895, a brick building was built and that lasted until 1925 when the present stone building was constructed. The history of the church is very much reflected in the architecture.

The church is very much cherished by the community and by Westmounters. Its members included several prominent Westmounters – it's a significant church. Interestingly, it was built at the same time as Victoria Hall and City Hall. When you compare the architecture, you can see the similarities.



A fall walk in Summit Woods with Rev. Neil Whitehouse (left)

WM: *The Wild Church concept has many excellent elements. Could you highlight some of them?*

Whitehouse: We have run monthly visits to **Summit Woods** – 9 am from the church door or 9:45 am at Summit Woods on the first Sunday of each month. **Jessica Stilwell** is our new Wild Church Educator. We will run the new Wild Church in Westmount Park to reconnect with nature and share these experiences with like-minded other people.

It is not about the Christian religion, although it is thoroughly Christian to participate. It is an experience of the future when open-mindedness and being connected to nature and other people make profound differences in our choices and priorities and arrive at sustainable human civilizations. There can be practical actions such as support for a 'Friends of Summit Woods' organization. The programme needs to grow first.





Pets are always welcome at the church

The church worship service always has a significant **Faith in Nature** content with a video and an exercise to listen to nature as the First Book of God, which we call The Great Conversation. This is part of the section when we listen to God's word with traditional readings of the Bible. So there is an integrated approach. People of any religion and none are welcome, along with your pet. We have a **Nature Niche** in the west transept of the Sanctuary with a Green library, plants under lights, an aquarium and a microscope. The east transept is the **Peace Niche**, remembering those who served in World Wars, and recently, a place to remember past pets and to light a candle to express eco-grief.

For a small church, this is a significant contribution to a hopeful green future.

'... even though it's [Westmount Park] a managed park, nature is present and it's also wild, so we're looking forward to experiencing it in a new and powerful way, and sharing it with like-minded people.'

***WM:** How can people get involved, especially families with young children and people of all ages who care about the environment?*

Whitehouse: Turn up at the church or email us at westmountparkuc@videotron.ca, and we'll tell you what's going on. We're increasing the number of opportunities from one to twice a month, and we're hoping to increase that next year. It is a gradually evolving program with walks in Westmount Park and elsewhere and, of course, Summit Woods. Jessica Stilwell is developing a great programme.

Westmount Park is really good because even though it's a managed park, nature is present and it's also wild, so we're looking forward to experiencing it in a new and powerful way, and sharing it with like-minded people.

***WM:** The church runs a successful houseplant program and has a garden project that is helping to spread environmental awareness in the community. How do they operate, and how can people pitch in?*



Choosing a plant as part of the plant re-homing project

Whitehouse: In October, we received and gave away houseplants as a **plant re-homing** exercise. Plants that have outgrown balconies or risk being composted because they will not survive outside in winter are re-homed. This retains carbon and contributes to short-term CO² reduction. Every little bit helps, and this concept is so simple it could domino to be significant. It also gives increased air quality to homes and the nurturing and peace plants offer. The City gave us 35 large palms, many of which are going to refuges and hostels. Forty people came to pick up plants. The idea for re-homing came from the first Wild Church walk on November 2, 2021, when three palms were re-homed in the church.

The **House Plant Project** runs year-round. We grow plants to give away – fix carbon and make people happy. With a plant, people receive growing and propagating information, so they can grow it and give it on. So it is a living pyramidal system. **Annie Bounmy** is our new House Plant Enthusiast, and **Jennifer Ball** is our new House Plant Project Coordinator.

Anyone is welcome to drop in on Sundays, especially to taste something of these different activities. We are a **Living Church**, which means new ideas and support for our regular life are needed and appreciated.

To learn more about the church, visit westmountparkuc.org, call 514 937-1146 or email westmountparkuc@videotron.ca

*Feature image: Summit Woods, by Nigel Goddard
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