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Aurora United Church celebrating bicentennial



By Brock Weir

What William Tyler did with his five shillings 200 years ago is lost to the mists of time, but, for generations of Aurora residents, the other side of the transaction is abundantly clear.

The results provided the backdrop for two centuries of joy, sorrow and spirituality in this community and, although it has taken many forms, the foundations of this investment are still going strong today.

Wednesday, February 21, marked the 200th anniversary of William Tyler exchanging an acre of his land at the corner of Yonge and Tyler Streets for the purposes of ?a house of public worship for the use of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Province of Upper Canada.?

Within a month, a log cabin was on site and the congregation known as Aurora United Church was born.

Now through November, Aurora United Church will mark this unique milestone with a series of events designed not only to celebrate its storied history but showcase its future.

Celebrations are as varied as a Jesus Christ Superstar Movie Sing-A-Long next month to a reburial ceremony at Aurora Cemetery of nearly 20 unknown of the Aurora United Church's (AUC) earliest members whose graves were uncovered during recent excavation work on the original land.

This ceremony will be particularly poignant as, in many ways, it closes one chapter in the history of AUC, one that was all but finished with the church's devastating April 2014 fire and opens a new, as this forgotten parts of AUC's history were only found while laying the groundwork for a brand new spiritual home on-site.

?This church has been in flux many times before,? says church historian Helen Roberts, a member of a committee tasked by AUC to steer the bicentennial commemorations. ?2014 was not the first fire, nor the first building we lost. Over 200 years, we have gone through fires, depressions, and wars but [my focus is] how we have gone through all of these things and come out the other side, continuing to move forward.

?Right now we're in a transition period again, but we're still working ahead and will move forward.?

Since the fire, AUC has been renting space from Trinity Anglican Church, a stone's throw from Yonge and Tyler. This has made things tricky for the bicentennial committee as nothing can take place at their historic centre.

Some of the celebrations are taking place at Trinity, some in the Church Street School, and others at the Royal Canadian Legion.

The closest the bicentennial celebration will get to the actual Yonge and Tyler site is a display being organized for the Aurora Street Festival on Sunday, June 3.

?It would be wonderful if we had a building and could celebrate a new church as well as a 200 year old church at the same time, but a new one will come soon enough,? says life-long AUC parishioner, and committee member, Bob McRoberts.

?I have been a member of the church all my life; I have been singing in the church choir since I was 12, so over 50 years. My wife and I were married in the church, my parents were regular attendees, my mom sang in the choir and grew up in the church, so there are a lot of memories growing up in the church.?

Some of these memories could soon be found in an ongoing project which will be a key legacy project of the bicentennial.
On the AUC's 150th anniversary in 1968, a history of the church was compiled. The book itself is a rare commodity these days, but AUC is planning on republishing the book, along with a new section outlining its momentous last half-century.
?We've started a program called Telling Our Story,? says Ms. Roberts on collecting 50 years' worth of new stories and anecdotes which will stand the test of time until their 250th anniversary is celebrated in their new digs. ?I am familiar with some of the [stories and stories of initiatives] that have come in, but I am really quite amazed by how much work has gone into this. When we get them printed, I think people are going to be amazed at how much has gone on over those 50 years, so we're looking forward to doing that. Hopefully the book launch will go hand in hand with the exhibition that will run until the end of September.?
When asked why the community as a whole should sit up and take notice of this milestone anniversary, both agree that its significance goes well beyond the faithful, whether residents have been most impacted by their worship, service programs that found a safe haven at AUC, or are one of the countless numbers of Aurora kids who have come up through the 3rd Aurora Scouts over the last 60 years.
?After the church fire, my next door neighbour came to my door in tears saying she was so sorry for my church,? says Ms. Roberts. ?I had never seen her at the church, but she said she got married there and it meant a lot to her that the church had burned down. [Another woman said] when she was a kid she used to visit her grandparents in Aurora by taking the bus up Yonge Street. ?When she saw the church's spire, that's where she knew to get off the bus. That meant something to her too ? it was a landmark.?