

Barbecue will be time of celebration and exchange on church's future



By Brock Weir

Since the end of April, the northwest corner of Yonge and Tyler Street has been little more than an open field, sprouting steadily increasing blades of grass.

Next Saturday, however, it will be the centre of celebration and dialogue as the Aurora United Church hosts a free barbecue to give thanks to a community that has embraced it following their devastating spring fire.

Celebrations will get underway at the former site of the church on September 27 from 2 ? 5 p.m. It will feature a free barbecue, live music from Glenn Marais and Delayne Drive, face painting, and a special tribute to Central York Fire Services.

The event is being spearheaded by a group of women who aren't newcomers to celebrating Aurora United Church. The annual ?Right Back At Ya? bash to raise money for the congregation and its programs was their brainchild and doing something special for the community in this is a natural extension of that spirit, according to Shannon Clark.

Ms. Clark, a member of the Aurora United Church for the past eight years, says the outpouring of support from the community was ?unbelievable? following the fire and a primary driver of this event.

?Nobody expected Aurora to stand by and say, ?Wow, that is our church,? she says. ?Even if people have not gone to church for 15 years, they were baptized there, their children were married there, or they had funerals there. It seemed like everybody came out of the woodwork and took ownership of the church. It was just so unbelievable that we knew we had to thank people.?

But this feeling of ?ownership? should extend into the future, she says. To this end, organizers hope this will spur a dialogue on what the congregation, and the community as a whole, would like to see as part of the Aurora United Church. It might be they would like to see a gymnasium as part of any new structure, banqueting spaces, or even a theatre space.

?We're hoping that people will really feel like they have some say about what a new church would look like,? she says. ?We will have a big scroll of paper with crayons there [for people to say] what their Aurora United Church looks like. We need people to come out and say what they want from the church [because] it really is the centre of Town. So many people in the community have taken part [in it] in some way, shape or form with the church. We want people to have a say in that and maybe it will bring them back.?

Having a party on the site that was the scene of such destruction just a few short months ago might bring a mixed bag of emotions

for some members of the congregation and the community at large, but Ms. Clark says it will help those people who have been staying away from the site to come and share in the celebratory atmosphere.

I am hoping there will be warmth and fellowship and people won't feel intimidated by the church, she says. Sometimes big, old denominational churches can be intimidating and we are hoping those walls will be broken down and anybody can come in and feel like they can be a part of something.

To underscore this point, Ms. Clark shares a post-fire exchange between Reverend Andy Comar and congregant Keith Scott, both of whom are Scout leaders in groups that used to meet at the church. After the fire, the group told Reverend Comar they wanted to do something to help your church get back on the ground, a term which Ms. Clark says he found bewildering as it was everybody's church.

That is what I want to come from this whole thing people wanting to feel ownership of something that is so important in so many ways, more than just faith-based, she says. We want people to really speak up and say how you could benefit from having a new church that can really support a community that is as great as the Town of Aurora.