

200th anniversary will close a chapter for 21 early church parishioners



By Brock Weir

Two hundred years is a long time in the life of any congregation.

Over two centuries, people come and go, founding families move away, and the very principles of the parish evolve as well. Such is the case for Aurora United Church, which marks its 200th anniversary this year, but as they look to rebuild on their historic site at Yonge and Tyler after their disastrous 2014 fire, the congregation has had a sobering and poignant reminder of their roots as they look to lay the foundations for their future.

Earlier this year, homes on Tyler Street were demolished to make room for the reconstruction project, which will incorporate both the new Aurora United Church (AUC) and a new retirement home.

In between the footprint of the former church and the demolished Victorian homes, however, archaeologists discovered the remains of 21 members of the church's earliest foundations, the names of which have been lost to archival fires and time.

A ceremonial reinternment of these now-unknown forebears of what is now AUC will form one of the highlights of the anniversary year this fall.

"The [discovery of remains] was a surprise to the congregation," says AUC's Lorraine Newton-Comar. "You think that is inevitable, but that knowledge [of the graves] was not with our people. The last burial was in 1869, and I think over that time, because the archives were burned once before in our first fire, we had no idea. This has been a very slow, highly respectful process, and it has taken quite a while."

These numbers could grow this week as AUC begins archaeological excavation on their former Yonge Street parking lot, once a known part of the AUC cemetery believed to have been fully excavated decades ago.

"Once the first remains were found, we knew we needed to do something to mark our forebears in faith, so trustees will purchase a plot at the Aurora Cemetery, or whatever we need to purchase, and have a service to reinter the remains," adds AUC's Andy Comar. "We will have to wait until they are done and then we will do that in one go. There will also be a marker in place as well so people know these were once people who belonged to the Aurora Methodist Church."

When the first remains were found, AUC was determined to find out just who they were.

"There was absolutely nothing, which was concerning," says Lorraine. "We thought the Town might have records, but [this cemetery] even predates the Town."

Any records the Church may have had on file were long since destroyed, so there was very little that could be done. What is clear from archives that do survive is the cemetery was closed in 1869 and, at that time, relatives were allowed the opportunity to reinter their relatives' remains elsewhere, but the conclusion now is that these 21 individuals were just not claimed or had no one to claim them.

"This was lost to time," says Lorraine. "It is not a great, big piece of history, but it shows you that in a relatively short period of time, people just do forget and information is lost. That was certainly the case with us."

The 200th anniversary of Aurora United Church has been an unusual journey of rediscovery.

Had they still been in their traditional church building at this time ? or, indeed, in their yet-to-be-built new spiritual home ? celebrations would be rather different.

As they continue to share space with Trinity Anglican Church, the celebrations will be a bit muted by comparison, culminating in an exhibition at the Aurora Museum & Archives this summer and a special service on October 28.

?It is a little overwhelming to [be leading the parish during the anniversary] because we always talk about us being an 'in-between' after the fire and being here with our Trinity friends,? explains Lorraine. ?We have always talked about linking arms and pulling together after a trauma and all the sadness of that time. Everyone has just pressed in closer and it is working. We have retained the congregation for the most part, which is kind of miraculous. It is very seldom in a clergy-person's life that you ever experience anything like this and it has probably been the hardest we have ever worked as a team ? but the most fulfilling work we have ever done in the church.?

Adds Andy: ?It is an anniversary to be celebrated. We were hoping they would be in a new building by now, but it was not to be. The anniversary celebrations during the year are probably a little bit less than what we would have done if we were in our own building, but certainly to mark this, it is a historic occasion. The things we've planned are geared towards bringing the congregation together, bringing former members and friends?and we will encourage people to come back and be a part of the celebration.?