

## After 132 years of Sundays, Aurora's Baptists get ready to say goodbye



**By Brock Weir**

Dianne Harrison doesn't like to sit in the background.

When she takes her place at First Baptist Church at the corner of Wellington Street East and Victoria Street, she and her husband Brian secure a place in one of the first three pews. She wants to see what's going on and be on hand to greet people.

But, as the years have gone by, the number of people she has been able to greet from her prime position has dwindled and this Sunday, December 27, Ms. Harrison will be welcoming church members for the very last time as First Baptist Church holds its final service after 132 years of serving the Aurora community.

Ms. Harrison looks around the building with pride, pointing out decorations prepared for Christmas services, as well as dusty old framed photos that have been salvaged. Everything that is not nailed in or screwed down is destined for a new home, whether it is the Aurora Museum and Archives or other area churches.

But, as she sits down in her regular pew, this pride is tempered with emotion.

'Our church is small and it is like a family,' she says. 'We are hoping we can all go to another church that would have the same beliefs that we do, and that will be able to inspire what we have in our church and increase the congregation, but even if we don't go to the same churches, I know we will stay together as a family because we are a family.'

This family has its earliest roots in King Township. As Aurora's population grew, so too did the need for a Baptist church to call its own. There has been a church on the site since 1883 and the cornerstone for the present building was laid in 1964.

At one time, the congregation of First Baptist Church topped 200, but with a core group now sitting in the neighbourhood of just 20, the church made the tough decision to sell up this summer, with the sale to land developers closing this past Tuesday, December 15.

'It is a hard decision because we weren't being good stewards of our money,' says Ms. Harrison. 'When you're spending more money than you're taking in, it is just not a good move. The money that we have could do a lot of good in the community. We put the church up for sale and it was sold, but we were all hoping and praying it could go on. We came to a reality check about a month ago and said, 'We did make the right decision' because of the finances.'

'We didn't have enough to keep going. We have a beautiful pastor in Pamela Fitkin who has been with us since September and I think if she came in maybe five years ago we would have been able to rejuvenate and bring back the congregation, but in a short

time of a few months, there is no way we can bring the congregation back to have enough people to keep it going.?

This struggle for renewal and rejuvenation, says Ms. Harrison, was at the core of the church's issue. Having become a member in 1981, there was a noticeable drop-off in youth participation to the extent she and her husband looked to a church in King to keep their own kids engaged in their faith. By the time they went out in the world, the parents returned to the home parish, but the struggle to draw in the youth remained.

?The church dies if you can't get your youth to come out,? says Ms. Harrison, noting most of the congregation is now in their 70s and 80s. ?There was a time when everyone would know the beige school bus that went around Town that would bring the kids in. We had a strong Sunday school here. But, then there was a difference of opinion here in the late 1980s. It split the church and a lot of people found other churches to go to. Since that time, the congregation has become less and less.

?I don't think we kept up with the times. You have to change your music, you have to have something to draw in the kids. You have to have their interest and make sure they know that they are not afraid God is a person who is going to have a wrath on you, not be a Bible thumper, but that God is a caring person. As long as you have faith and hope you can have a future. Sometimes with the kids, it is very hard to stand up. I think peer pressure makes it very hard for kids to stand up and say, ?this is what I believe.' Sometimes right now we have too many followers and not enough leaders.?

The First Baptist Church, however, has had its leaders. Perhaps one of its lasting and most immediate legacies is the creation of the Aurora Food Pantry which was founded by late parishioner Lorna Rummenie in the church basement and continues to serve the community on Industrial Parkway South.

As the congregation gets ready to mark its final Christmas in their church and its last ever service on December 27 at 11 a.m., Ms. Harrison says she hopes those who have left the church, those with fond memories, will come out one last time to say goodbye to an old friend.

?I would love to see people come out who have good memories to say farewell and wish the best to the people who are here in finding a new home,? she says.