

Aurora United Church: A personal history



By Bob McRoberts

My church has burned down!

The site has been a place of worship for 196 years; the oldest in Aurora.

In February of 1818, William Tyler conveyed, for the nominal sum of 5 shillings, one acre of his land at the corner of Tyler and Yonge Streets for the erection of a house of public worship for use by the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Province of Upper Canada.

Later that same month, David Culp preached the first sermon in that log cabin church.

With the arrival of the first train to Machell's Corners in 1853, the Town and its businesses started to grow. The congregation of the church was expanding.

In 1855, the original log church was moved to the back of the property and replaced by a larger frame structure. Coincidentally, this frame church was partially destroyed by fire in 1877.

Some of the lumber was salvaged and sold to Mr. J. Andrews for his house on Mosley Street.

In October of 1878, the new building opened at a cost of \$8,915.

The yellow brick, at 6 cents per 1,000, came from the brickyard just down the street, before the Collis Leather Company began.

The new church had two spires, one over 100 feet high. In 1893, a cyclone blew down the taller one. It was replaced, but both spires were taken down in 1943 after too many lightning strikes.

Former Prime Minister of Canada, Lester Pearson, attended Sunday School at the church as his father was minister from 1900 to 1903.

The Methodist and Presbyterian congregations joined in 1925 to form the United Church.

In 1987, the church underwent a million dollar renovation project with additions on the north side. In 2009, major renovations were made to the interior of the church.

When someone or something is lost, it generates many fond and personal memories. That certainly is the case with the loss of the Aurora United Church. As I stood watching the flames and smoke, I could hear many of the spectators sharing their reminiscences.

I'm sure that's the same for thousands of others.

I've been a member of the church my whole life, almost 62 years.

Since the age of 12, I've sung in the bass section of the choir. I've seen the backs of the heads of a number of ministers and the faces of many church goers.

Here's a very brief list of what's popped into my head the past two days: my baptism, marriage, and mother's funeral; my kids' baptisms; my wife as a Sunday School coordinator, my dad as a trustee and offering collector; my mom as perhaps the longest-serving member of the choir; my grandfather, J.H. Knowles, as Clerk of Session and Chair of the Board of Trustees; Iltyd Harris (school music teacher and former town councillor) as my first choir director and voice teacher; Rev. John Morris as my first minister who lived in the manse on Catherine Avenue and had a wonderful neighbourhood skating rink.

There was Reg Sheppard (of Sheppard's Bush) as my Sunday School teacher and storyteller; David Ouchterlony's recital on the church's 1930's Casavant organ and saying the acoustics were the best of any church he'd ever played in; Lester Pearson's visit; the families of Bill Devins (orchard/school); Lambert Willson (park), Ross Linton (mayor), Arnold Miller (principal), Norm Johnson (principal), Ada Johnson (oldest known Auroran who died last year at 109); T.H. Oliver (heating business); Norm Cook (who turns 98 next month, men's wear store); Roland Moddle (teacher/artist); Bill Thompson (furniture store/funeral home); Rex Sedore (dentist).

I realize this is a very narrow snippet of one person's immediate memories. Thousands of people have had personal connections to the church.

To me, it is obvious that a church, like a school, is more than just a building. It's the people and their beliefs and actions in their community and beyond.

These, thankfully, all still exist.

The Aurora United Church has been a focal point of friendship, fellowship, outreach, and worship in the heart of Aurora for almost two centuries.

Now is the time to heal and rebuild.