

Aurora United's landmark towers, narthex reduced to rubble following fire



By Brock Weir

They have been a landmark in Aurora for nearly 140 years but, on Tuesday, demolition crews began the painstaking task of reducing the two towers of the Aurora United Church (AUC) to rubble.

Last week, two independent structural engineers gave the church, still reeling from the April 11 fire, the 'devastating' news that the two towers and the narthex, the iconic façade facing Yonge Street, were structurally unsound and had to be taken down.

Fire crews with the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), as well as all York Region fire departments on hand battling the blaze, worked hard to keep the façade intact as they fought the blaze and then worked with demolition crews to get at some of the deep rubble which was then still smoldering.

Parishioners at AUC also maintained hope they would be able to retain the façade and rebuild behind it, in whatever form the new AUC would take.

'The news was greeted by the church council with 'heavy hearts.'

From Council's perspective, it is devastating, said Rod Johnson, Head of the AUC Church Council. 'It is more devastating news because we hoped we would be able to save the church facing Yonge Street. It is just one of those things that when engineers tell us it is not structurally sound, it just has to come down. We just have to accept the recommendation with heavy hearts.'

A decision, he added, has yet to be made on the future of the newer structures added to the original church buildings.

Stained glass windows in the narthex, which survived the April fire, were painstakingly salvaged and removed from the building on Thursday ahead of this week's demolition.

In the meantime, church operations continue as normal.

Sunday marked the first regular service for AUC at Trinity Anglican Church on Victoria Street, which will be their home throughout the summer.

Organization also continues at 12 Tyler Street, a home already owned by the church nestled in behind the ruins of the church, which has been overhauled into the nerve centre of the new church community. Recently vacated by a family, they expected it would take about five weeks in order to restore it to its former glory but in the aftermath of the fire everyone pitched in and turned it around in just five days.

As the AUC gets back on their feet in their new spiritual home, and in their temporary community space on Tyler Street, members are also stressing their gratitude to the CYFS and all first responders who came to the scene.

“Everyone has their own story or their own angle of how they are watching the fire and it was very painful, particularly for those who have invested a lifetime of emotion and activity within that building to watch it burn,” says Mr. Johnson. “When you see fire trucks that have their reels up and no water being sprayed, for a long period of time people are going to jump to conclusions. I relate it to sitting in a chair behind a surgeon watching someone die and not understanding why they are not saving the person. They have no idea of the bigger picture.

“If you are standing on the north parking lot watching, you are not aware on the south side there are firemen who are in the church and up in the attic trying to put out the fire. The fire spread through the cedar shakes underneath the metal roof and that was what they were attempting to deal with. The Fire Chief said the fire was so hot the hats on the firefighters were melting and, with the sea of water, they had to exit the attic on their bellies down the stairs.”