

Bells ring out to mark "rebirth" of Aurora United Church



(Revs. Andy Comar and Lorraine Newton Comar flank Bob Kyriakides, who salvaged a stained glass window from the ruins of Aurora United. The window was given to Aurora United Church by St. Paul's United in Oak Ridges after their two congregations merged. It was one of several items, including the celebrated hand bells, that Mr. Kyriakides helped salvage. Auroran photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

One by one, over 700 people filed into the auditorium of Aurora High School.

And one by one, each person had a shiny butterfly sticker stuck to their hand, their cheek, or wherever they requested ? within reason, of course.

?This is a butterfly, which is a symbol of a new beginning,? was the common refrain of lay volunteers as they did the honours; and that was the spirit felt in the at-capacity room as many people marked their first Easter Sunday without their life-long spiritual home.

?I have had some anxiety about this morning,? said Reverend Lorraine Newton-Comar in her sermon. ?I worried, wondering if everyone would find their way to this space, into this set-apart place, the only place we could find that could accommodate all of us. We worried that everyone might not get the word as to where to find us. And look, here you are. Here we are together.?

As people found their respective places in what was, for many, an unfamiliar space, they were greeted by musicians lead by Glen Marais, choirs, and the sight of a row of hand bells placed neatly at the front of the room, before the makeshift altar.

These weren't the same hand bells the Aurora United Church (AUC) congregation had come to love ? indeed, they had been generously leant by other area churches ? but the knowledge their own hand bells had survived the fire, and were currently being brought back into shape, moved many in the crowd, not the least of which the hand bell players themselves, to tears.

?The church is not just a building in the end; it is the people,? continued Rev. Newton-Comar. ?We have been singing those very words for years. We have taught our children these words. This will sustain us. It is sustaining us ? the thought that regardless of where we are, we are in God's hands and we are still a congregation.

And yet, in the midst of that assurance, is the truth we have lost so much. For each of you with varying personal histories within the congregation, parts of the building will hold special, significant memories for you and over the days, as we try to make sense of why and for what purpose this fire holds for us, so many of you will be recollecting the Sunday school, the teachers, leaders, nursery, the social [aspects], the children running around, laughing and learning about their faith.?

In addition, spaces which had been used by groups such as Al-Anon, Scouts and Brownies, hosted wedding and baby showers, celebrations for milestones and of life, have been lost, but the memories live on.

What is profoundly true is that each of us will carry the spirit of AUC with us, our memories held in our hearts and minds for safekeeping until we re-emerge in some new form. That is for always. That will never change and no fire, no calamity, will ever take that away.?

In her remarks, Rev. Newton Comar paid tribute to members of the congregation who banded together in the aftermath of the fire, particularly Carol Lever and Steve Falk who moved heaven and earth to ensure their traditional Rise & Shine Breakfast continued as planned less than 24 hours after the April 11 fire.

Some people, she said, not necessarily familiar with AUC, or Trinity Anglican Church, which stepped up to the plate to provide much needed assistance in the aftermath of the calamity, were equally surprised their response was so swift. No need to be so, she said, that is just what we do.?

[After the fire] the stench of burnt wood hung in the air and the remnant few of the congregation stood and stared, she said. What was there to say? There were no words. It was done. It was finished. Even then, even in the despair that brought so many tears, the potential for new life was already rumbling. We have seen evidence of the resurrection before, encountering it as we have over the course of our lives. We are capturing it most especially in the days since the fire.

We have come to know death is not the end, that love never dies. Easter points to life and we want that in each other. Our question of what God might have in mind for us, and our community, and concerns we all hold for one another, we are mindful that once in time, God birthed a son into the world that we might have life again.?

Since the fire, AUC parishioners have been shuttling between Aurora's Trinity Anglican Church, Newmarket's Trinity United Church and Aurora High.

This Sunday, however, the congregation will have a sense of a new home, at least through to September during the regular 11 a.m. service at Trinity Anglican Church.

They are literally walking the walk in terms of being a good neighbour and allowing us to breathe and survive and we are very grateful, says church council chair Rod Johnson. It already feels like home.?