

Church stands United one year after devastating fire



Reverends Andy Comar and Lorraine Newton Comar, along with Rod Johnson, chair of the AUC Parish Council, react to a joke in Mayor Dawe's speech.

By Brock Weir

The devastating fire that decimated the historic Aurora United Church one year ago on April 11 is seared into the memories not only of parishioners, but most Aurora residents.

In the aftermath of the fire, members of the church proved they are a faith community in the truest sense of the word and also, more broadly, the fire demonstrated Aurora is 'a community of faith,' said Mayor Geoff Dawe.

Mayor Dawe delivered this message as church members demonstrated it last Saturday as they gathered on the former site of the church for an afternoon of reflection and remembrance.

For many in the crowd, it was hard to believe that a full year had passed since they were robbed of their spiritual home, but there was little sadness to be had. They are grateful for what the fire brought out in the community and are eagerly looking forward to the future when the Aurora United Church rises once again from the barren corner of Yonge Street and Tyler.

'On a day such as this, when we recall our greatest sadness at the loss of our beloved church, we are thankful for the opportunity to gather here today amid so many loving and caring friends to remember, to reflect, and to look to the future,' said Reverend Lorraine Newton Comar, who leads AUC with her husband, Reverend Andy Comar.

'Over the months of this year, there have been many times we have declared ourselves to be 'pilgrim people', travelling lightly, but with purpose, our hearts and minds focused on what God might have in mind for us,' added Rev. Andy.

'It has been a blessing to Aurora United Church members the knowledge we have never been left on our own, that so many have tended to us in this year,' noted Rev. Lorraine. 'Life is a journey, faith is a journey, best when we go together.'

Almost as soon as the fire broke out last year, leaders from Aurora's various churches quickly arrived on the scene to offer their support to the Comars and the AUC congregation. They, along with the General Council of the Aurora United Church and other

faith bodies all conspired to, in the words of Rev. Andy, 'provide a soft place to fall.' Ultimately, however, they have made their home at Trinity Anglican Church, sharing facilities and resources with their fellow Christians.

According to Beverley Wood, who represented Trinity at Saturday's service, this has made things a bit 'cozy' at the Victoria Street church, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

'I remember a year ago being here and also remembering not only was there the warmth and spark of the fire itself, there was a tremendous warmth within all of us who were gathered at that time, and the caring and sharing of that day is something I am going to remember for a long time,' said Ms. Wood.

'It is amazing what can happen through tragedy and how we have all come together. There is a sense of joy. It gets a little cozy and crowded sometimes on Sunday, but it is that incredible feeling of, 'yes, I know who my neighbour is.' Although we are cozy, we're comfortable and it is a nice feeling. There is something to be said for togetherness. What we have learned by being in close proximity to one another is just an amazing gift, in a strange way, from our Lord.'

This was a feeling shared by Rod Johnson, head of AUC's Parish Council who, in the days immediately after the fire, was one of the lead spokespeople on behalf of his congregation. Speaking of the history of the church, he said the 'pain and sorrow' felt by the community on April 11, 2014 was 'palpable.'

'It left you with questions of how 136 years of memories could just disappear and, more importantly, how are we going to go on?' said Mr. Johnson. 'The answer to the second question was answered almost immediately. In the midst of all the confusion of the fire trucks and hoses and everything that was going on that day, our leaders were already taking some steps forward in terms of a new path.'

That new path leads them back to Yonge and Tyler where the congregation has decided to rebuild. Plans and architectural designs could be coming forward by the end of the spring. That development will be followed closely by Living Waters Presbytery of the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada, which has been providing much needed support to the local congregation over the past year.

'[Last year] we brought words to you of comfort, consolation, compassion and all those wonderful 'c' words, and we were grieving with you,' said Cathy Phillips of the Presbytery. 'Today, I am here to express what an inspiration you have been to all of us over the past year. You inspire us with your faith, you inspire us with your sense of commitment and love for this church, this congregation, and the community.'

'We are inspired by how you have allowed people to reach out and help you. It is not an easy thing to do sometimes to accept help and you have been open-armed in your welcoming of that. Just know we walk with you in all of your planning, in all of your praying, and we are so happy to be there with you.'