

Churches make unexpected discoveries about each other ? and themselves ? coming together after crisis



By Brock Weir

Love thy neighbour has been at the core of the Christian faith for centuries, but knowing thy neighbour might be another thing all together.

Despite having been neighbours just a stone's throw away for the better part of 140 years, Trinity Anglican Church and Aurora United Church never really had a chance to get to know each other at the core level ? that is, until faith threw them together last month.

Reverend Dawn Davis of Trinity Anglican Church vividly recalls receiving a text message on the morning of Friday, April 11, that Aurora United Church (AUC) was ablaze. Arriving on site soon after, she sought out AUC's leaders, Reverends Andy Comar and Lorraine Newton-Comar to say Trinity was there for whatever they needed.

?It wasn't really thoughtful, it was reflexive,? says Davis of immediately offering AUC a place to worship that weekend for Palm Sunday. ?We had no idea at that point how bad [the fire] was going to be.?

That, however, soon became clear. Within hours, the roof was gone at Aurora United Church and although it was still a couple of weeks before the burnt-out shell of the church was completely demolished, both AUC and Trinity knew their lives would never be the same again.

That became clear the very next morning when the traditional Rise and Shine Breakfast went ahead as scheduled, this time at Trinity rather than AUC.

The following day was their respective Palm Sunday services, which welcomed people from both congregations lead by Davis and Rev. Ian Martin.

They didn't realise at the time that it was the first step of many on a new, long journey both of discovery and fellowship which could come to define both churches for decades to come.

Since then, members of AUC have been worshipping at Trinity at their 11 a.m. service. An initial agreement with the two churches

solidified this agreement until August 31, but come the fall, it is a relationship that will continue.

Both congregations are expected to approve a new plan this week which will see Trinity use their regular worship space for their traditional 9 a.m. service, while turning over the space to AUC for an 11 a.m. worship. Trinity parishioners will then be welcomed to the adjacent chapel, the original Trinity, for their respective Anglican service at 11.15.

This is an arrangement which is expected to be in place for a year, with options to renew in years ahead until the newly rebuilt AUC is established.

It is not a decision that either was able to make lightly. Both had to weigh the opinions of their respective congregations. Both needed to evaluate the needs of the community groups that call each parish home, and a review of the space required to accommodate everyone was an inevitable necessity.

While there are, of course, growing pains experienced by everyone, it is a journey that both parties seem eager to continue together.

For Davis, when they began working together, there was a shared sense that both churches were in the midst of an 'important moment.

'Things weren't going to go back to the same,' she says, noting that the offer to move forward together was framed as an opportunity, but having to strike just the right balance in working with a community which was still in grief. 'We did this back and forth thing and then it was really clear that we both wanted to take a journey together.'

For Comar, it was a test, but one from which he believed they would emerge with strength.

'Relationships are strengthened, new relationships are made, and when we came to their congregation a few weeks ago, no matter how long this relationship lasts of us being here, whenever we go our separate ways, we will never be the same as we were prior to April 11,' he said. 'You are changed by this experience and you do move on knowing that you have all these new things in your life and we are not the same people we were.'

But, who were these people? Although they had worked together frequently 'and very effectively ' on outreach programs, and despite being neighbours for nearly a sesquicentennial, there were many aspects of each faith that were unfamiliar to one another, and many questions unasked.

In this situation, however, there was no point in beating around the proverbial bush and the results appear to have surprised both.

'It was something to overcome thinking there was more to overcome than there really was,' says Martin. 'Whether we like it or not, we all have images in our head of what each person is like. But, when you actually see them and see them in front of you, [you learn].

'As we kept going along with each other, there was less and less to step over. It was more of, okay, we can respect that, and it is more inviting to ask questions like how you do things instead of thinking, 'that's what they do. Don't question it.'

Adds Davis: 'Once you start sharing, it is all about the incredible blessings you receive from sharing. You can talk about it, but to live it has been amazing. I keep thinking that they are grateful that they have a place, but I keep hearing from our people how grateful they are that this is happening to us. It is making us question things we are taking for granted. It is making us make choices that are much more clear and expedient and effective for our church. There are a lot of great things that are happening because of us.

'I think you get so busy in your separateness and trying to maintain your separateness. One of the huge learnings is that coming together has allowed us to share our resources and communities [where we] didn't have enough time to get to know each other. Now, we have the time to get to know each other.'

Now that they have the time to get to know each other, they are quite pleased with the results.

?We now say our new best friends are Dawn and Ian, because we have been together and realised quickly we are pretty good together and that is pretty unique,? says Newton-Comar. ?Let's face it, we are a really good mix of people.?