

Distraught congregation hopes for new life after devastating fire



By Brock Weir

Members of Aurora United Church are looking into their faith following Friday's fire which gutted not only their spiritual centre, but also a building which has served as the spiritual home for generations of their families spanning nearly 140 years.

As the flames raged, first from the rear of the church and quickly spreading to engulf the entire building, many parishioners looked on with tears rolling down their cheeks, some describing the frustration of feeling 'helpless' in the situation, and others the emotions they felt as a building so rooted in their memories was turned to ash.

Parishioners gathered in nearby parking lots to watch the scene unfold. As they looked on, their numbers swelled. Those who arrived after the others ran to embrace old friends. Some, many former residents of Aurora, drove in from places as far away as Barrie just to be with their fellow congregants as the unthinkable happened.

One congregant who had been in the church when the fire broke out was Laurie North, who said she had been attending Aurora United Church since she was a baby. She had just arrived at the church ready to volunteer in the decorating for their traditional Palm Sunday service, when a roofer working on repairs rushed in to call 9-1-1.

'I was baptized here, I went to Sunday school here, I was married here and our kids were christened here,' she said, dabbing her eyes. 'It is really upsetting, but at least everyone is safe. You can always replace a building, but this just tears you apart.'

Local business owner and musician Steve Falk has also been attending Aurora United Church since he was a toddler and has been very active in supporting the church, both in fundraisers and in his regular children's music programs, one of which was scheduled for Palm Sunday.

The music he had collected for the kids over the decades went down with the church, as did its musical instruments ranging from a very rare Quebec organ which was recently refurbished, to the hand bells which had become so popular in the church's annual Christmas concerts.

'I know every cavity of this place and you can imagine how difficult it is to put a fire out in something that is over 100 years old,' he said. 'You are going to miss a building, but it is the community of people that makes this place strong. Is this reaction being rational, or is it shock?'

There to lend a helping hand and a kind word, as they had for many of these people's weddings, christenings of their children and grandchildren, or funerals of their parents, spouses or partners, were Revs. Andy Comar and Lorraine Newton-Comar.

'It is just a building, it will be rebuilt or something new will come from its ashes,' said Andy, as the fire raged. 'We're leading into

Holy Week. This is a very passionate week for us as Christians and with Good Friday and Easter it is always a sign of new life. What new life will come from this, only God knows, and we will wait for that.?

The Comars were joined at various times throughout the day by Fr. Joe Gorman of Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church and Rev. Dawn Davis of Trinity Anglican Church, who each offered a helping hand in providing support for the United Church Parish. As Good Friday and Easter approach, it is that support which is needed now more than ever.

?I am absolutely numb,? said Lorraine. ?This is so devastating. So many people here have been here their whole lives. Some of the youth that have come by today were baptized here. Some young couples who went by were married here or just baptized their babies. The people in this area have been involved in this church in a lot of ways.

?I am not a member of this congregation; I serve it. It is just such a loss not only to me personally, but because of the depth of loss that people will feel to their own lives and were just such a presence in the community. It is not just the loss of the building, it is the ministry and that is a lot of people who come on a Saturday morning [for our Rise and Shine Breakfasts]. There are a lot of people who depend on that, but I know the power of the community to come together and I am hoping for that.?

For many parishioners who came out to watch, there was a shared sense the church is less about the building than the people who not only worshipped there but invested their time and effort into the community as a whole.

?I don't know how many nights we spent in this church with sleepovers, 30 Hour Famines, and all of the stuff we did for years,? said Bruce Williamson, who led many youth groups at the Aurora United Church over his three decades of membership.

As he spoke, he looked on as the flames began to die down, with an eye fixed on the few remaining stained glass windows at the very front of the church which were, at that point, unscathed.

?There is art in there and a lot of it was made by the people of this church,? he said. ?The time and the effort and the love that went into that, all that can be replaced, but it is the memories. There was a time not too many years ago when every single person in this town would have been in this church at one time or another. The people who were members of this church put a lot into it and they gave of themselves.?

Erina Kelly expressed a similar sentiment, standing with Mr. Williamson near the corner of Yonge and Mosley, but said it was hard to find just the right words to convey the emotion inside.

?This church belongs to everybody, not just the congregation,? she said, questioning what it meant to people who were married there, or had a funeral for a loved one within its walls. ?We have lost our sense of place. The congregation is the people. We can rebuild it, but this is just beyond sad. There aren't words to express it.

?The church really did do good works in the community. That is what this is about; helping people who need help.?