

Historic downtown building returns to roots as a place of worship



The southwest corner of Wellington and Victoria served as the spiritual home for Aurora's Baptist community for more than 130 years until its closure in 2015.

Potential new uses have come and gone over the last nine years, but it has now returned to its roots as spiritual home ? as the site of Aurora's first permanent mosque.

The Al-Abrar Muslim Association is the proud new owners of the former Baptist Church building, which served the congregation until it was disbanded in December of 2015.

The community, led by Imam Refaat Mohamad, first began serving the needs of Aurora's Muslims that same year, providing myriad programs and services out of several rental units around Town.

Their ?new? building, he says, gives the Association, and its members, a more permanent sense of place in a community with an ever-growing Muslim population.

?When we started there were no services for the community in this particular part of Aurora and we started from scratch, below zero,? says Imam Refaat, noting that prior to the establishment of the Al-Abrar community, people of the faith met and organized in more informal locations, such as in the basement of the former Omar's Shoes stores, an initiative established by the late Omar Khamissa, and at mosques in Newmarket and Whitchurch-Stouffville.

?There was no mosque, there was no facility for the Muslim community in Aurora, and because I was living in Newmarket and [worked a little bit with their Mosque] I found this Town deserved to have something. In the Muslim community, you always need a Mosque ? a place where people can get together to worship, very simple. We did as much as we were able to do in rental properties and, at the end of the day, we found this property was for sale last April. It's a beautiful location, well-established and we said, ?Let's try it!?"

It wasn't a simple matter of giving it a go, however. They needed to raise \$4 million to support the project, and their community answered the proverbial call.

?We found that people were excited and happy because this is a very prime location downtown,? he says. ?We are very close neighbours with the Aurora Public Library, the GO Station, Town Park, the business area? everything looked amazing. We just had

to paint, put in some new floors and move in.?

Another bonus, in his view, is they were able to pick up where the Baptists left off in continuing its role as a House of God. The fact that they are also in close proximity to churches serving the Anglican, Presbyterian and Romanian Orthodox communities, as well as the United and Catholic congregations just steps away on Yonge Street, is an added bonus.

?The good thing is we didn't lose this [building] as a place of worship; it always hurts me personally, and I am sure all of us in Aurora, when a place of worship becomes something else. It's still the same and I am glad it is. We have an amazing community around us. God made this happen; it took some time, but that's fine. We didn't give up, we never despaired. We were working, slowly, and we're happy. God blesses us to have a place that is a very old building, established by good people who used to be here, really brave people who established a building like this with a strong, solid foundation.?

As the Al-Abrar community continues to grow in its new home, Imam Refaat says he and his team are focused on ramping up programs. Known as a Masjid, they aim to be a place for Islamic education, music, culture, and a place that provides services to all Aurora residents, regardless of faith, including goals to help local food security whether it is providing hot meals to community members in need and/or establishing food bank services.

?We're here to extend the services to the community and be a part of the success of the people of Aurora,? says Imam Refaat.

By Brock Weir