

?It will be a new vision for a changing community?



It's often said that time heals all wounds but, for Nancy Kerswill, the feeling of being overwhelmed is still as potent as it was a decade ago.

As she turned north onto Yonge Street from Bloomington after a meeting in Toronto, the sight of black smoke billowing into the spring blue sky was difficult to comprehend, but the gravity of the situation didn't take long to sink in as she approached the heart of Aurora's downtown core.

Kerswill was one of dozens of members of Aurora United Church who gathered, almost in a state of disbelief, to watch their spiritual home burn down a decade ago today (Thursday, April 11).

It was Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday ? a reflective time punctuated by death and resurrection ? and now, ten years later, she and others for whom the landmark golden-hued church is only a memory, are looking ahead to seeing Aurora United Church (AUC) rise from the ashes at the corner of Yonge and Tyler.

It has been a long ten years for members of AUC who have, since the blaze, shared space with Trinity Anglican Church just up the road, an arrangement which began to take shape before the fire was even under control.

But excitement is in the air as the steel for the future church began to take shape on the site; and it's not just a piece of land, it's a corner the congregation has occupied in different buildings and configurations for more than 200 years.

Last week, Kerswill joined long-time AUC Reverends Andy Comar and Lorraine Newton-Comar, and construction manager William Dobson on-site last week to reflect on this week's anniversary with *The Auroran*.

The meeting took place in the concrete basement of new church building. It's a space that began to be used earlier this year as a boardroom for AUC's Edge Property Committee, which has been steering the reconstruction for the entire journey.

In this rebuild, the AUC will share the site with Amica, an incoming retirement residence which is nearing completion. While Amica is ahead of the game, Committee chair Brian North says parishioners and the community at large are still about a year away from seeing a grand opening ? possibly in April or May of 2025.

?There have been a lot of challenges,? said North. ?We brought up the remains of 181 [people] when we thought we might find one

or two because we did know at one time there was a cemetery on the site. We had so many challenges of the years but we made it through.?

These are sentiments shared by the Comars, who have served the AUC community for more than 15 years. Although they are planning to retire this year, they made a commitment to the parish that they would all stick together through to the end of this journey. While their service may not be in the sanctuary much longer, they will continue to be active in the community, whether they are, as Newton Comar says, leading a parade of AUC members from Trinity to the new site when it's ready, or just being among the crowd.

'We're very mindful that it is 10 years,' she said. 'In the congregation, we've talked about how it is a long time and [but], looking back, it kind of feels like a very short time in a way ? yet look at what has been happening in the meantime and taking shape. Knowing we will be there in a year is almost overwhelming and it's just a wonderful thought that we will be marching over together, headed into the front door.

'There's no question people have had their doubts over the years and that's normal. They wondered, as the years were passing, 'are we really going to be back there?' It was truly the steel starting to go up, that 'Wow, it's real and our hopes are coming true!'

Andy has seen a similar curiosity in the community on what's in store.

'People are starting to see the shape of the building,' he says. 'I'm at Chartwell Park Place for services and they're watching. They go up to the top [of the residence] and they are watching, asking me all these questions. The community is hopeful for us as well.'

William Dobson, Dalton's construction manager on the project, says the shape will change significantly over the next few weeks. This week, they are working on the west face of the building and, following that, work will begin on the east front facing Yonge Street, which will be a modern interpretation of the façade generations of Aurorans came to love.

'By June 1, we would like to be able to start pouring concrete and doing all our exterior framing, and that will give a full picture of the church,' says Dobson. 'It means a lot to the Aurora community and it means a lot to me too just working up here [as] I've been in the community for the last 10 or 15 years. I think it will be great to see such a beautiful building ? the extensive redesign and re-engineering to get us to this point.

'I have a lot of pleasure working on this site,' he added before turning to the Comars, 'I can't wait to hopefully walk with you.'

People may have had doubts on the construction timeline, as Lorraine noted, but there were also doubts over whether the congregation would be able to weather the storm and survive as a group.

'It really was losing our home and losing a spot where family is,' said Kerswill with a crack in her voice. 'The feeling that night (of the fire) at Trinity of community coming together, thinking, 'What are we going to do?' I remember my daughter wouldn't look at the site ? every time we drove by, she would lie down on the back seat because she couldn't look at the site. From Day One, we said we would be back and rebuild ? and we thought it would take three years!

'I had a gentleman say to me the other day, 'Wow, you've hung in for 10 years. The church must be very special to people.' That's when it made me really think about the position of the church in the overall community and all of the outreach programs, and all of the groups that were using our building; I start to see that come back again. Some of it happened over at Trinity, but it is not so much for us as a congregation because we functioned all along; it's more the big picture and what that building will mean to the community and having all that activity happening again.'

The Comars agreed, seeing AUC and its outreach as integral to the heart of not only Aurora's downtown core but the Town as a whole.

?It's in the heart of the Town and in the hearts of the people,? said Lorraine. ?We know that for sure. Everything will change because this has changed us all. It will be a new vision of how to go forward in a community that is changing. Yes, we are a jewel, but look at Town Square and the core of Town and that core of Town is just coming to life. Aren't we lucky??

Added Andy: ?Downtown is changing and the church is a place for the community to gather as well. The congregation will ensure that the spiritual life of the congregation continues, the leadership, and there will be spiritual practices offered, worship, whatever the congregation decides to offer the community. We still have new people coming; it's not the same old congregation ? they're there and we've all invited people to join us.?

?We can't really talk about retirement because it is just too emotional at this point ? we're not there yet,? Lorraine continued. ?We said we'd all stick together and it ended up being the whole congregation ? you take my arm and I'll take yours. We just linked arms and that's how we've come and we will come back to church in that way.?

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