

Voices soar to mark 200th anniversary of Aurora United Church



By Brock Weir

"This church has seen some days," said Nora Sanders, General Secretary of the United Church of Canada's General Council, to a packed house on Sunday morning as Aurora United Church officially marked its milestone 200th anniversary.

A service filled with moving words, sounds from a team of musicians some 40-strong, and stories of service and partnership, it was one more momentous day in the storied history of the church, and shone as much of a light on the path forward as where they have been for the past two centuries.

The 200th anniversary service took place at Trinity Anglican Church, which has been the spiritual centre of Aurora United Church since the devastating 2014 fire which destroyed their church building at Yonge and Tyler Street, a plot of land which, for the past two centuries, has been their spiritual home.

At the start of the service, reminders of the church's early foundations, as well as symbols of hope that rose from the ashes, were placed on the altar for all to see.

"When we were new to this sanctuary, having come out of tragedy, we were offered this table by our Trinity friends to centre our worship," said Rev. Lorraine Newton Comar, who leads the Aurora United Church congregation alongside Rev. Andy Comar, gesturing to the slightly weathered wooden table at the front of the church. "We had nothing for the table that didn't smell of smoke, and then those from other churches who cared for us began to bring to us the practical elements of worship."

Those practical elements were initially collected in a very practical way, in a simple gym bag, and, as Rev. Lorraine spoke, parishioners Nancy Kerswill, Lori North, and Holly Williamson conveyed the blue gym bag to the table, carefully unwrapping and placing each item in turn.

"Every week thereafter, the communion table would be set in the centre here," Rev. Lorraine continued. "The pulpit would be brought down from the altar and out of that bag would come the things we set our hearts on in this time: a cross, given to us by New Hope United Church; a Christ Candle, cobbled from our homes, base and handle alike; a yellow brick, recovered from our burnt church, a prayer shawl given to us from Newton Robinson United Church, wrapped around the cross every week as it wraps us all still in love; a hymn book representing the many given to us by our sister churches in our presbytery and beyond.

"We commune from this table. We have become attached to all of this, this way of things, this expression of the presence of God that touches each of us in its simplicity."

There, at the Bicentennial Service, the past became the future, she said, and this was reflected in the messages and readings delivered to the vast congregation and dignitaries, including Ms. Sanders, Terry Davies, Chair of the Living Waters Presbytery, Mayor-Elect Tom Mrakas, and, representing Trinity Anglican Church, Minister Patrick White and Associate Minister Philip Josselyn-Hamilton.

"This anniversary year has seemed to have passed by very quickly and we have enjoyed a number of special events including the

AUC exhibit here at the Aurora Museum & Archives, concerts, worship, of course, teas and dinners, the production of a history book and so much more. Today, we look back to look forward, celebrating together in this sacred space, embraced by the good people of Trinity and their leadership these four-and-a-half years now, said Rev. Lorraine. Many hands and voices contributed to our celebrations today and they come from every part of our church community and we offer our deep thanks and appreciation to everyone.

First among the guests to speak was Mr. Davies of Living Waters, who light-heartedly touched upon some of the heavier issues that AUC has had to address over the years, from cyclones knocking down spires to the latest fire.

You have gone through an enormously difficult time in the last four years and it was just an awful, awful event, he said. It has been a very challenging time and you have done wonderful things. You've created now a design for a new [church] and I am sure you're all anxious to get that ground broken to actually start doing it as opposed to taking up the things that shouldn't be there when you can build, which you have been working on too. I would not want to go any further without honouring the brothers and sisters of Trinity Anglican Church who not only stepped up to help for four years Trinity Anglican Church has provided space, support and comfort and true brotherhood and sisterhood.

These sentiments were, in turn, reflected by Trinity.

I arrived a year after the fire and I had only heard downtown at the diocese of this amazing thing that these two communities were doing together and I was a little skeptical at first when I heard about it, said Josselyn-Hamilton. Anglican churches and United churches don't always do so well together, but we are so glad. I really feel like we're going to miss you when you move to your new place.

Appropriately, the plans for the new church and associated retirement home, were cleared just days before the service on October 22 by the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal.

After a reading from the Book of Job, Ms. Sanders said there was much in the air to stir the soul, not the least of which are the stories of community and partnership that have come out of AUC's last four years and its relationship with Trinity.

This church has seen some times, she said. You have experienced some trials and tribulations and somehow you have continued as a Christian presence in this community through it all. I saw a quotation from The Auroran earlier this year, 'two centuries of joy, sorrow and spirituality in the community' and that is a great way to describe the life of this church. You have nurtured generations of people in the faith. Sometimes as the United Church of Canada we think we play a role in the statements we make as a church nationally and I think we do, but I really think the greatest role that our church plays is in the lives of the individuals who come through and are nurtured in the faith.

Hardship plays a significant role in the story of Job, hardship which ultimately leads to salvation. In Ms. Sanders' view, this is a journey also exemplified by Aurora United Church.

In the midst of hardship, look forward, have faith in the possibility of better days ahead, even when things are so bad it seems impossible that life will ever get better, she continued. Remember that God is faithful to us, even when we're not given the answers we want. I know I am speaking to a congregation that knows something about that. I have a feeling that the people in this congregation, those who saw the church through cyclones, lightning, fires, that most recent fire, you people of this congregation knows something of this.

You know how hard it is to feel God's presence in the midst of adversity. You also know the importance of faith in God's accompaniment to those better days ahead. Yes, God is with us through the ups and downs, through the highs and lows, through the joy and pain.