

Trauma, Grief, and Renewal: ?Our job description was ultimately written by circumstance?



?And the world will be a better place.?

They are the timeless words brought to life by Jackie DeShannon in her 1969 song Put A Little Love In Your Heart,? refreshed by Annie Lennox in more recent years ? and they took on new resonance once again on Sunday as members of the Aurora United Church raised their voices as one to say farewell to long-time church leaders Reverend Andy Comar and Reverend Lorraine Newton Comar.

For parishioners, they made their faith community a better place as they used their strong leadership to keep the congregation from scattering following a 2014 fire which destroyed their spiritual home of more than 150 years. Then, just six years later, they were on the forefront of reinventing the church to a virtual realm in the face of global turmoil.

?Our ministry will be remembered as a time of trauma and grief and then renewal,? said Lorraine on Thursday, reflecting on she and Andy's 16 years at the head of Aurora United Church. (AUC)

But their ministry was about so much more than that.

The Comars first came to Aurora United Church after serving at Guelph's Trinity United Church.

They weren't looking for a move, but as AUC was coming out of what Lorraine describes as a ?challenging time,? the congregation was looking for stability ? and that's just what they found in the husband-and-wife preachers.

Both Lorraine and Andy followed similar paths to seminary.

They both grew up within the Aurora United Church, embracing what they describe as their ?service ministry? of community outreach.

They both became intended candidates at the age of 16, making good on their calling as full candidates at university.

?We both knew this was our life's calling because we had very loving congregations that nurtured us and were very supportive of what we wanted to do in life,? Andy recalls. ?When we were going into seminary in the early 1980s, basically everybody in our classes had that same pathway ? but, later on, more and more ministers are coming from second, third careers, they're older coming

into the ministry, but young people are also coming back in.?

?We're kind of a dying breed that way,? says Lorraine of being younger grads. ?That cohort of younger undergrad, masters and ordained ? there are not a lot of us left. We've often met clergy who are older than us, who were just ordained a year ago, and that really speaks to the change in the church.?

What doesn't change, however, is their Social Gospel Church, which is what the couple was keen to bring to Aurora after they decided they were, in fact, ready to move on from Guelph and take on a new challenge.

?We did a workshop with them about what we thought we could help them with and, given their needs for the church and where we thought we could assist, they offered us the call and we came,? says Lorraine of talks with the AUC, emphasizing that the quest for stability was key. ?We felt that as a married couple, certainly, with a united front, we could help in that regard, and I think that proved out.?

One of their first tasks was taking part in AUC's Visioning Group to chart its future. Coming out of that group was a renewed mission statement and a new logo and brand, ?Uniting Hearts and Hands on the Journey.?

?It's funny because people at the time were saying, ?Gee, I wonder what the journey is going to be,? says Lorraine, with a slight chuckle, hindsight now on her side of how that journey unfolded.

It was a journey of uncertainty that was certainly aided by their two sets of stable hands as fire ripped through the church at the corner of Yonge and Tyler Streets just before Easter 2014, bringing them into an unimaginable situation just a few years into their mandate.

Their community outreach and quick thinking ensured at AUC and its community work, including its Rise and Shine Breakfast for underserved members of the community, continued barely skipping a beat, speedily forming a new partnership and shared space with Trinity Anglican Church.

?You always come in with a job description and we created our own job description with the aid of the search committee, etc., but our job description ultimately was written by the circumstances,? says Lorraine.

Adds Andy: ?They don't teach any of this at theological college!?

?Coming in, you had to learn how to adapt on the fly and that is not really a big thing you learn in seminary,? Lorraine continues. ?I mean, church often is so much ?same, same, same' and it has been a very dynamic experience. You just never know what's coming ? and I think that's not a bad thing, in a way.?

Rebuilding a long-established church ? something else they don't teach you in seminary! ? has certainly been a challenging experience for the Comars, but it has also been a rewarding one.

Work on the new building and sanctuary continues apace with construction tentatively expected to be complete by the end of this year, while the Amica Retirement Community being built in conjunction and partnership with AUC will most likely welcome its first residents this fall.

As the church began to quite literally rise from the ashes once again, COVID-19 was the next hurdle they had to shepherd their congregation over.

This was another instance where being married preachers helped as they, with the help of some tech-savvy parishioners, were able to almost-seamlessly deliver services to the AUC community via Zoom directly from their living room.

‘As the pandemic became a reality, people still had the vision of going home to Yonge Street,’ says Lorraine. ‘It was a pandemic, we were all experiencing it, we were not alone in it, but we were still keeping the dream alive. Whatever we had to do to maintain our ministries, our pastoral care team, they were on the phones all the time calling people, making sure folks were okay. We adapted to all we had to do to keep going.’

‘We’re very organized people. I hope people know that we also reach out to get help because we cannot do everything on our own. That’s the whole ethos of the church, right? You reach out, you do it together. We’re happy to lead in that way, but so deeply happy that we had these amazing people who were so adept at different things that enabled us to continue most of our ministries in that time, even the breakfasts.’

But, all good things must come to an end and that’s how the Comars feel about their retirement.

Having made the decision to retire earlier this year, the last few months have been as much about celebration as it has been about tying up loose ends.

They participated in the traditional Return of the Symbols service this past June, bringing it up a bit ahead of their actual retirement before parishioners scattered for the summer, and they were particularly happy to be able to preside over the reinterment last month of 180 early pioneers whose long-forgotten remains were uncovered during the reconstruction process.

Despite hanging up their vestments, they are excited about Aurora United Church’s future and hope to be able to participate in its grand re-opening in the New Year.

‘There have been a lot of changes in the 16 years we have been here, but certainly a lot has stayed the same,’ says Andy, pointing into one unshakable partnership, AUC’s participation as one of seven churches in the ecumenical organization Welcoming Arms, which provides invaluable services to residents in need, as a prime example.

‘To think Aurora provides five-plus meals every week for a Town this size? That’s incredible. There’s still enough of the old Aurora here when you talk to people, but there’s also the new and people from every continent under the sun seem to be here in Aurora and we noticed at the Street Festival this year people coming up to the church site that hadn’t been here in 2014 who didn’t even know a church was on this site.’

‘It’s a beautiful change,’ Lorraine adds. ‘It’s a lot of years to cover and looking back in time, in years to come, people might ask, ‘What happened when Andy and Lorraine were there?’ ‘Oh, well, our church burned, then there was a pandemic,’ and that’s what they’ll remember, right? Definitely our four years before the fire was preparation, learning, making connections with people, relationships. Get ready, go! Our true ministry came after that – that’s what will be remembered. It was a time of trauma, it was a time of trauma and grief, and then renewal.’

‘Our theme running through our build and the design is the rising of the phoenix and that will certainly be the case for the organization feeling like, finally, we’re back home – we’ve risen from the ashes and that is coming true.’

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