

Aurora United Church "dreams big" with rebuild on historic site

By Brock Weir

After months of brainstorming and developing a vision for the future that lies ahead, the congregation of Aurora United Church has voted to rebuild on their historic land at the corner of Yonge and Tyler Street.

It was a decision that had been up in the air ? and the subject of considerable discussion ? since fire gutted the 140-year-old landmark on April 11 of last year, but location was a key consideration in meeting the needs of their members and the community at large, according to Rod Johnson, chair of the Aurora United Church (AUC) Council.

According to Mr. Johnson, the months of discussion have led AUC to an eight part vision statement which focuses on ?discipleship, justice and outreach, leadership, ministry partnerships, spiritual and self-care, pastoral care, stewardship and worship,? and their spiritual home of nearly 200 years still ticked all the right boxes.

?As part of our visioning process, not only did we speak internally to the congregation, but we also reached out to stakeholders in the community and everything from the external community to our internal ministries of things like the Rise & Shine Breakfast pointed to the fact we need to be accessible,? says Mr. Johnson. ?Certainly Yonge and Wellington is prime real estate in Aurora. If you want to be accessible to all citizens in Town, including the needy or the less fortunate, being on the Yonge Street strip with transit and so forth is really where you need to be, as opposed to something that is less accessible like Industrial Parkway or some suburban location.

?Certainly from an outreach perspective, we need to be there.?

A Methodist Church was first built on the site in 1818, and those foundations have led to a ?strong tradition and historical significance? to continuing to worship in that space, he adds.

?I know speaking to many people in the community, they would be very disappointed if they didn't see a church rebuilt and continuing on the site, and that is essentially the feeling of the congregation.?

With this all-important decision made, the next big step will likely be made by the end of this quarter ? and that is what this new Aurora United Church will look like.

Rebuilding exactly what they had before is certainly an option, but alternatives are also on the table. These alternatives, says Mr. Johnson, could include more space for community outreach programs, developments and programs that could provide ?some sort of long-term income stream? to help with the ?financial feasibility? of the new building.

?Our property committee is going to dream up a number of ideas and present them to the congregation,? says Mr. Johnson. ?The congregation will then vote on a direction. What we're going to build is still an unknown, but it could be anything from just a church structure to something that is larger, encompassing other possibilities.?

Of course, these possibilities ? whatever they might be in the end ? were the last thing on the minds of the congregation at this time last year when they were getting into the full swing of 2014, with Easter observances just over three months away; Easter Services that went on nevertheless, but in other locations including Trinity Anglican Church and Aurora High School.

?We're in a time of exodus, if you will, in the sense we physically lost our building, but the gift of losing our building confirms more than ever that we continue as a church family,? says Mr. Johnson. ?We have been graciously welcomed by Trinity, who have provided us with a place for worship, as well as some space for our staff. Even though we're in different pews and listening to different organs, the same familiar faces, and some new faces, are still there.

?Our ministry and church family continues to exist no matter where we are. You always hear that a church is not a building, and we were forced to live that truth and it rang true for sure. Having an empty sandbox, so to speak, we were left with the opportunity to dream big and do something great for the community. We look forward to that opportunity in the coming year.?