

INSIDE AURORA: From the Ashes

By **Scott Johnston**

Like many people last week, I was transfixed by the horrible events that unfolded in Paris, as flames from the burning Notre Dame Cathedral lit up the night sky.

What immediately struck me were the similarities to events that occurred here in Aurora almost exactly five years ago to the day, which resulted in the loss of Aurora United Church (AUC).

Both structures were located in the very heart of their respective municipalities, and had served their communities for many years. Notre Dame was 850 years old. While the AUC building had stood on Yonge Street for a relatively shorter time, its 140 years represented a period almost as old as the Town it served.

At the time of the fires, both churches were undergoing extensive repairs and renovations. It is known that work on the roof ignited the Aurora fire. While investigations are still underway, at the time of writing this it is believed that the Notre Dame fire was also associated with repair work.

The recovery of priceless artefacts was another similar theme in both fires.

Fortunately, many of the Paris church's priceless artifacts were able to be saved during the blaze.

Due to how quickly the fire spread, this was not possible in Aurora. However, some items on site were retrieved from the ashes, including Communion sets, an account book from the 1800s, and a set of hand bells. Additional artefacts, mainly in the form of historical documents, have since been donated by members of the community from their personal collections.

The most positive similarity in both fires was that no members of the public nor any first responders were killed.

The fires that occurred five years apart did not completely consume the structures, with a number of walls remaining standing. However, in Aurora damage to these areas was extensive and it was deemed necessary for safety reasons to demolish those parts of the church that survived the fire.

In Paris, pictures show that while the spire and roof are gone, the rest of the exterior walls of Notre Dame are largely intact. Although

inspections are still being conducted, it is hoped and expected that much of the original building can be saved.

One optimistic note in both cases was that once the blazes were extinguished there was immediate confirmation from local officials that the structures would be rebuilt.

Although his country has far greater resources to draw on, the French President has set an extremely ambitious (and I feel unlikely) timeline of five years for the Notre Dame repairs to be completed.

Here in Aurora it is now five years since the AUC fire, and while much planning, design, fundraising and approvals have moved forward in that time, actual construction has yet to begin. It is hoped that formal groundbreaking will take place this summer, with all work being completed in about two years.

It is too early to know what form repairs may take to the original Notre Dame building in Paris, or how the final version may differ from the original.

Starting with a blank slate, the new AUC will incorporate some design elements of the old building, but will be updated in part to allow it to be used as a more flexible community space.

While the losses of both buildings are tragic, it is inspiring to see their respective communities coming together spiritually and physically to rebuild these landmarks.

I will continue to watch the progress of the rebuilds of both monuments with great interest, and look forward to seeing both churches fully re-established on their respective municipality's skylines as prominent and inspiring centres of worship, community and history.

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