

From our history: St. Matthew's Church Hall

Most people notice the imposing spire and sanctuary of St. Matthew's United Church long before they realize that there is a second building next door. The church hall was not part of the plan when the sanctuary and its basement were constructed in 1859. For almost 100 years the worship services took place in this sanctuary, and everything else that the congregation was involved in happened in the basement below us.

It was the demand for space for weekday activities that first sparked talk about in a church hall in 1919. Women's associations, which were active not only in the life of the church but also in the social concerns of the community, needed better facilities from which to do their work. Similarly, youth programs were hindered by a lack of space. It was a challenge to have a large group of enthusiastic children playing games around the floor-to-ceiling support beams, a situation the church records refer to as "the pillar hazard."

After nearly 20 years of talking about a church hall, the congregation decided in 1938 to actually build one as a 200th anniversary project. It was to open in 1949, two centuries after the founding of both Halifax and the St. Matthew's congregation. However, the war intervened.

What a difference a hall would have made to St. Matthew's during the years of the Second World War. Every day of the week the church was used by hundreds of military men and women. The sanctuary was packed to the rafters every Sunday, and during the week they came to the lower hall for an evening's entertainment of cards, singing and fellowship. The basement of the church was in great demand during those war years and served the congregation and its guests well.

After 1945 the congregation focused its attention, fundraising and action on the church hall project. And it opened in February 1954, complete with a gymnasium with stage, a Ladies' Parlor, a kitchen and administrative offices. Don't be deceived by what you see from Barrington Street – the addition is quite large!

Today the church hall is an important part of St. Matthew's outreach work. Every week it hosts the Sunday breakfast for scores of men, women and teens. It is a rehearsal hall for musicians such as the Chebucto Band and the Samba Nova drumming group, and once a year it hosts the North British Society's annual levee. It is also a basketball court, a space for rummage sales and Christmas bazaars, a stage for performing artists, a meeting facility for community groups, and a reception hall for weddings and funerals.

Some wonder whether the hall has outlived its useful life; accordingly, an ad hoc committee has been established to dream about what might replace it should St. Matthew's ever have a huge windfall of money!

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Summer 2006