

## **St. Matthew's in World War II, and other stories**

I believe that Jill Rafuse presented an account of many of St. Matthew's contribution to this and the military community during WW II a few weeks ago. It's not my intention to repeat that history, but simply to relate some personal memories of that period – there being so few of us around these days who were old enough to remember much of it.

First, for those who might wonder what this lovely sanctuary looked like at that time, I invite you to pause for a moment down there at the entrance and look at a framed picture of this sanctuary taken by a Montreal photographer in 1925. Unlike today, this was a sombre, sober (*and if you'll pardon the reference, very Presbyterian*) place of worship then and throughout the years of 1930s and 1940s. All of the woodwork was painted or stained the same dark brown that we still see today on our beloved high pulpit. For a better impression of the overall colour, take a look at the ceiling. That was the colour of all to the pews, downstairs as well as up, the faces of the balcony and its supporting pillars. The only brightly coloured stained glass window was the beautiful East Rose Window – a strange and long-standing contradiction to the sombre, sober Presbyterian setting of the rest of the sanctuary. And it remained that way until the very talented Laura Wellard brought colour to this Sanctuary some 20 years ago.

These choir stalls were in their long-standing (facing inward) position that continued to exist until the Anniversary renovations that were made a few years ago. All we saw was the back of this organ console. The organist, the respected Allan MacKenzie Reid, was discretely hidden behind it. It was then a complete mystery how one person could produce such amazing sounds with only 10 fingers (I didn't know then that he also used his feet). Now that the console has been turned around and we can see some of what goes on (John Hudson) – it continues to be as profound and wonderful mystery to me.

To fully appreciate the setting during WW II days, we must recall that all we had was what you see here, plus the basement immediately below. There was no attached auditorium and office building. The only bathrooms were the two old ones with which you are probably still familiar. Access from the basement area directly below was by a narrow, steep staircase that emerged through the floor over there below the wall now containing the framed Historic Tapestry. On hundreds of occasions we were to see the choir emerge led by Mrs. Dr. Vega Dawson. The choir would be followed a respectful distance by the much loved Rev. D.M. (or as my parents affectionately called him, Danny) Grant (he being another inspired boy from Pictou County), who would, of course, always climb the pulpit stairs and firmly close the pulpit door behind him – standing, as one of our recent Minister used to say, “six feet above contradiction.” Up to that moment, the sanctuary was in complete silence except for the soft tones of the organ prelude – talking or even discernable whispering in the congregation before or during the service was considered to be very poor form – so I was told frequently by my saintly parents. If children like me were present, we were held in absolute, motionless silence.

During the early and middle years of the War this sanctuary was frequently filled upstairs and down for many morning *and* evening services – the blues and khaki of military uniforms absolutely dominating the Sunday attire of the small civilian congregation. I remember clearly how, on a number of occasions, all pews would appear to be full,

downstairs and upstairs, before the beginning of the service – the ushers having given up on trying to squeeze in more people. At that time, the Rev. Daniel Grant would suddenly appear from the basement stairway (over there) and stand by himself (about there), quietly studying the impossible situation. Then he would speak to the seemingly full-house of perhaps 600 to 800 people (probably 70 % service people) and say that while the church appeared to be full, there were still several hundred people out on the sidewalk wanting to come to worship. He then suggested that if everyone just moved together a little closer, some extra seats for those outside might be found. There would be a general shuffling in the pews and magically there would be empty spaces all through the church – upstairs and down. Mr. Grant would retire to the basement again and the ushers would proceed to bring in several hundred more people. That done, the choir and the minister would enter in the normal way. Once safely enclosed in the high pulpit, Mr. Grant would observe that any of those still standing at the entrance who wished to come and sit on the pulpit steps or in any empty choir seats were welcome to do so – and another 50 or more people would come forward and sit there. I don't recall that it ever occurred to the leaders of the church that they might have been in violation of even commonsense precautions of fire or building evacuation. If the fire marshal knew, he must have busied himself on more important wartime matters.

I also recall, warmly, the regular Thursday evening “Friendly Hours” staged in the basement for the service people. The little hall below would be filled with service people. To picture that hall the way it was then, you will have to realize that the two partitioned classrooms on each of the north and south walls were not there. The room stretched from windows to windows. At the rear (Barrington Street end) there was, however, the beautiful glassed-in St. Matthew's Library, at the ends of which were two large black coal-fired hot air furnaces which blew heated air up through large, round steel grates, one at each end of the two aisles. The returning air to the furnaces would go down two similar grates, one at the bottom end of each set of pulpit steps. Some of us will remember that one of those was uncovered when this new, raised floor was installed a few years ago.

So in this somewhat larger room than at present, downstairs, would assemble hundreds of service people hoping for a little entertainment and fun. There wasn't much of either in Halifax in war time. The ladies of the Women's Working Society would be busy, busy in the now-disappeared old kitchen preparing sandwiches, coffee, tea, etc. for the assembled throng. The entertainment was largely, as I recall, a massive hymn sing-song – led by members of the choir – frequently by basses Ralph Herman and Percy Burgoyne. Tenor Alex Matheson was probably involved too. The words of the hymns and songs would be projected on the east wall by way of a Magic Lantern type machine using thousands of glass slides (like these). We still have the projector and the thousands of carefully stored glass slides. A number of us have intended that some day we would find a bulb for the projector, clean the machine up, dust off some of the glass slides and stage an old fashioned, WW II hymn sing for the enjoyment of today's congregation. Someday that might get done.

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