

From our history: The Second World War

During the summer our stewardship messages will recall interesting facts and events from the history of St. Matthew's. On this Canada Day weekend, in the year we mark the 60th anniversary of VE Day, it is fitting to look back at how this congregation responded to the Second World War and the tremendous influx of military personnel who passed through, or were based in Halifax.

Our downtown location made St. Matthew's an ideal gathering spot for enlisted men and women living on bases, or temporarily in port with Allied ships. This included not only British, Canadian and American troops, but also those of Australia, New Zealand, British East Africa, Norway and the Netherlands. The minister of the day was Daniel M. Grant, a native Nova Scotian, who had been called to this pulpit in 1937. When war was declared in 1939, he became an almost full-time chaplain to military personnel.

The congregation shared his enthusiasm for war work. Of course, men and women from the congregation joined the ranks of military volunteers to serve their country. Then, as part of their Red Cross work, women of the congregation – like so many others across Canada -- knit socks and scarves for the troops in Halifax and overseas. In addition, St. Matthew's established a War Services Committee that reached out to service people by offering entertainments such as games nights, social hours and sing-songs. The committee even distributed fresh fruit and cigarettes.

Naturally the church also offered spiritual support. Each Sunday men and women in uniform filled the church to capacity, sometimes to the point where the curved stairs of the high pulpit were commandeered for additional seating. In 1943 a special Associate Membership Roll was started for those who wanted a formal association with St. Matthew's, but who didn't want to transfer their memberships from far away.

The church's reputation for reaching out to service men and women became known across Canada. Some fellow organizations, such as the women's auxiliary of the Winnipeg Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve, sent an annual cash gift to help out.

Families in the congregation developed lifelong friendships with those who came to the church in search of comfort, hospitality and fellowship. The congregation's Second World War Memorial Project was a Book of Remembrance, which remains on permanent display at the back of the church. There is a page for every enlisted person affiliated with the church through membership or marriage, complete with picture and service record.

Rev. Grant was known for his preaching, and during the war he received an attractive offer to move to a much larger church in central Canada. However, he remained in Halifax, committed to his special ministry, until peace was declared in 1945. The experience of war service also instilled a new spirit in St. Matthew's, which now saw itself as "a church of importance in an Empire port."