

A10 | ARTS & LIFE

WELLAND THEN & NOW

St. Matthew's Lutheran Church going strong since 1876

MARK ALLEN OV
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Starting with a small collective of parishioners and an itinerant priest, St. Matthew's Lutheran Church has persevered for almost 150 years.

On Feb. 24, 1876, 12 German-speaking settlers led by Rev. Frederick C. Ebinger organized into St. Matthew's German Evangelical Lutheran Congregation. Six days later, the fledgling group bought land at what is now 59 Griffith St. from Thaddeus W. Hooker and Alexander Asher for \$75.

Having secured the site, the congregation constructed the first permanent Lutheran church building in Welland.

The cornerstone for the building was laid May 7, 1876.

Ebinger, who also served congregations at Willoughby Township's New Germany (now Snyder) and Humberstone, conducted services in German at a hall on East Main Street then at the completed church.

Ebinger departed in 1878 and was followed by a succession of circuit pastors, including Rev. Thomas Snyder, for whom the community of Snyder was named.

The first 38 years were difficult for St. Matthew's, as older members died and others moved away until only six families were left. The situation reversed with arrival of

Rev. Milton Bieber in January 1914.

Serving for nine months, he had a significant impact. He reorganized the church and established its first official records. The first constitution and bylaws were adopted and the church's first electric lights installed.

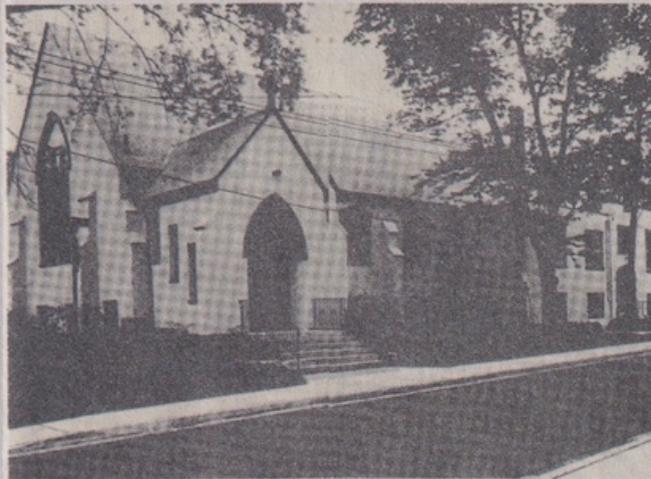
In 1915, the Welland and Humberstone congregations united, sharing a pastor and alternating Sunday services. This lasted until 1926, when St. Matthew's became a separate parish.

By 1925, lack of a permanent pastor was straining the church. A call was put out in January 1926, and answered by October with the arrival of Rev. Stanley W. Gartung. As the parish's first resident pastor, Gartung concluded the 50-year-old building needed significant upgrades. After celebrating the church's anniversary in November, plans were underway for a new building by 1927.

It became apparent remodeling was impractical, so it was decided a new church would be built. Plans for a larger structure were drawn up by famed Welland architect Norman Kearns.

On Aug. 19, 1928, the cornerstone was laid. In December, the structure's official dedication ceremony was held.

The former building was sold for \$225, moved to the corner of Empire and East Main streets and converted into a commercial building



The second St. Matthew's Lutheran Church building is shown in 1928.

WELLAND
PUBLIC LIBRARY



in 1930.

During the Great Depression, the church struggled and the war years saw 26 members of the congregation join the armed forces. In 1942, a parsonage was purchased on Kent Street and in 1948 a new Keates pipe organ was purchased.

The 1950s and '60s saw numerous renovations and construction. A new parsonage was acquired in 1965, and in 1968 the church got a new organ specially built by Walcker Co. of Ludwigsburg, Germany.

The church celebrated its centennial in 1976, and 10 years later became part of an independent, nationwide Canadian religious organization when the Eastern Canada

Synod severed ties with the Lutheran Church in America.

In 2001, in conjunction with St. Matthew's 125th anniversary, Welland's local architectural conservation advisory committee presented the church with a heritage plaque and it was designated a historic site.

Both the original 1876 church building and its 1928 replacement can be seen at their respective locations in the city.

MARK ALLEN OV IS A FREELANCE CONTRIBUTING HISTORY COLUMNIST FOR THE TRIBUNE. ALL INFORMATION IS COURTESY OF THE WELLAND MUSEUM ARCHIVES AND WELLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY.

St. Matthew's Lutheran Church continues to thrive on the corner of Kent and Griffith streets in Welland.

BOB
TYMCZYSZYN/
ST. CATHARINES
STANDARD