



## A Lutheran legacy Una herencia luterana

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### A Lutheran legacy

Story by Gregg McQueen



"We've managed to persevere," says Peter Deebrah, Pastor of St. Matthew's Church.

Not many organizations can claim to have been in existence for 350 years, especially in so young a nation.

But that is the case for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Matthew, which celebrates its 350th anniversary this year.

St. Matthew's traces its origins to a historic charter given by the first British Governor of New York on December 6, 1664, marking it as the oldest Lutheran church in the United States.

By Governor Richard Nicoll's hand and seal, the charter gave early Dutch Lutheran settlers the right to "freely and publicly exercise divine worship according to their consciences."

"Prior to that, Lutherans on this soil were punished for attempting to hold public services," explained Peter Deebrah, Pastor of St. Matthew's Church, now based on Bennett Avenue.

The original copy of the charter still survives, and is now in the possession of the New York Public Library.

Deebrah called it "a staggering thought" when he considers how long his church has been active.

"It's difficult to even wrap your head around it," said Deebrah. "Especially in a nation that was founded less than 240 years ago."

Based in lower Manhattan for most of its early history, St. Matthew's moved uptown to Harlem in 1906.

In 1946, the church purchased a building on Sherman Avenue in Inwood, where it remained until 2006.

That year, financial constraints forced the parish to sell the building and move to its current home at 178 Bennett Avenue, where it shares space with The Cornerstone Center, a spiritual and educational facility.

"Ideally, we will have a site of our own again one day, but it's an arrangement that works well," said Deebrah.

"Our hosts are very generous."

Deebrah, who has served at St. Matthew's since 1998 and was ordained pastor nine years ago, said his church has embedded itself as an important part of the community.

While in its Sherman Avenue location, St. Matthew's ran a food pantry program that fed 500 families per month.

The church also hosted Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings for more than 20 years.

"I remember a time when an AA participant came to me and said that the meetings were responsible for saving his life," recalled Deebrah.

"It was very humbling."

For the past fifteen years, the congregation has worked with Columbia University to provide the Inwood Academic Tutoring Program, which assists elementary, middle and high school students who are struggling with various school subjects.

St. Matthew's has planned a host of special activities to honor its 350th birthday.

To mark the occasion, the church has developed a commemorative medallion, to be issued in gold, silver and bronze, while a concert featuring several local choirs is scheduled for November 2.

A display of historical artifacts from St. Matthew's — including a communion set from the 1800's and the church's official staff, created in the early 1700's — will be displayed at Concordia College in Bronxville from October 17 until November 7, and at the church itself on December 6 and 7.

Deebrah said that the collection of artifacts might appeal to local history buffs, regardless of their religious affiliation.

"It's not just the story of a church, it reflects the history of our city and our nation," he remarked.

St. Matthew's now serves a modest but active congregation of about 30 people.



A weekly service is offered each Sunday.

The story of St. Matthew's is really one of determination and survival," stated Deebrah, who has guided the church through the loss of its own building and struggles with operating funds.

"The congregation has endured hardships, but we've managed to persevere," said Deebrah.

The pastor stated that he hopes that optimism will remain the enduring legacy of St. Matthew's.

"Regardless of where people find themselves in life," he said, "we give them hope."

***The Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Matthew is located at The Cornerstone Center, 178 Bennett Avenue, New York, NY.***

***A weekly service is offered each Sunday at 1:30 p.m.***

***Visit [www.stmatthewnyc.org](http://www.stmatthewnyc.org) for details on special events marking the church's 350th anniversary, or call 212.567.5948.***