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HOPE AND HISTORY



CONNOR HOLLINGER | FOR LNP/LANCASTERONLINE

The choir leads an evensong during the Celebrating 300 Years of Faith event at Bangor Episcopal Church in Narvon on Saturday. **BELOW:** The bell tower at Bangor Episcopal Church rises high above the town Sept. 29.

Bangor Episcopal Church in Narvon celebrates 300 years with friends, family and fellowship

GAYLE JOHNSON
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

Step onto the lush grounds of Bangor Episcopal Church in Narvon and travel back a few hundred years.

The landscaped cemetery that encircles the stone church displays faded headstones from The French and Indian War, Revolutionary War, Civil War and both world wars. A distant relative of President Abraham Lincoln lies here, and the oldest grave belongs to Mary Edwards, who died in June 1741 at 3 years old.

Gaze at the original stones from the 1700s, and admire the hand-carved initials and names from some of Bangor's original Welsh founders in 1722.

"The history just wraps around you," said Susie Almon-



BLAINE SHAHAN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Matangos, an Ephrata resident who first joined the church 27 years ago after a friend recommended it as a place where

Almon-Matangos and her husband could have their daughter Hannah baptized.

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Bangor Episcopal: Church celebrates 300 years of storied history

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That daughter has grown up. "Our church is older than America," noted Hannah Matangos, now 27.

"It is quite a special place," said the Rev. Canon Mark Scheneman, the church's part-time pastor and an adjunct professor at the Lancaster Theological Seminary. Scheneman previously pastored a Carlisle church for 28 years and joined Bangor in 2015.

About 100 members and guests honored the church's history Saturday and Sunday, as one of the oldest continuing congregations in the country celebrated its 300th birthday. The cool, rainy weather seemed a perfect replica to conditions often found in Wales, Scheneman mentioned. Hannah Matangos traveled from State College to sing during the weekend.

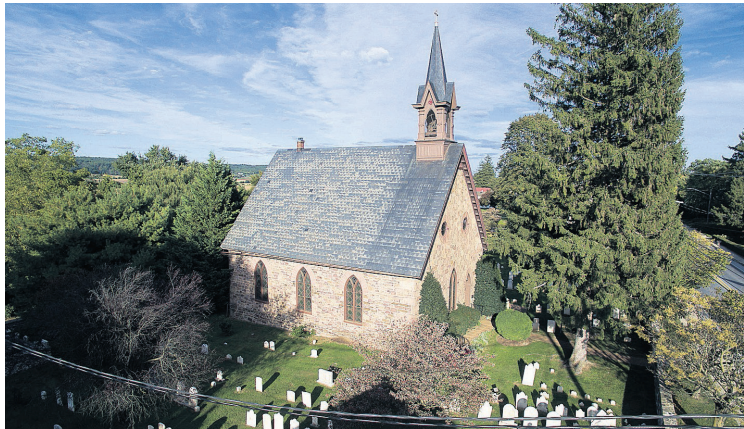
A Welsh choir sang at Evensong on Saturday followed by a banquet at the nearby Caernarvon Fire Hall. Sunday morning's service featured Bishop Audrey Scanlan, who heads The Diocese of Central Pennsylvania. Choir members from St. James Episcopal Church in Lancaster also performed Sunday.

"Our overlapping relationship is very important to St. James," said the Rev. David Peck, who heads the Lancaster group and attended the celebration.

Scheneman read three letters of congratulations during the Saturday banquet, where parishioners and guests filled three long tables to dine family style on ham loaf, roast turkey, cranberry sauce, buttered noodles and homemade bread and pies.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf, Bishop Michael Curry, who heads the Episcopal Church in the United States, and Archbishop Andrew John, the current Anglican archbishop of Wales, recognized the milestone. Local parishioners had hoped for a visit from Welsh clergy but a volatile pound and the death of Queen Elizabeth II helped force the Wales contingent to cancel a visit, Scheneman said.

Nationally, church, synagogue and mosque atten-



BLAINE SHAHAN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bangor Episcopal Church is nestled in the grounds and cemetery in Narvon on Sept. 29.

dance has dropped to 47% in the United States, according to the analytics company Gallup. Statistics come from information collected in 2020. Bangor's continued existence brings good news, said Scanlan, whose diocese covers about 63 congregations with 12,000 parishioners.

"Bangor is a symbol of hope for us in a time when mainline church attendance is shrinking," Scanlan said. "This small congregation persisted and is resilient. It sends a message that having a local presence in small communities is important."

Bangor, the oldest church in The Diocese of Central Pennsylvania, now has about 90 members. Worshipers still pay homage to the home church by singing the Welsh national anthem in its original language and featuring Welsh songs and prayers in some services.

Rich history

Welsh immigrants first came to Narvon to mine ore in the 1720s. They formed a church and named it after Bangor Cathedral in North Wales, which had its start in the sixth century. Those first members in Narvon worshipped outside under trees or a canopy for several years before building a log cabin church in 1734, church records say.

The church actually owned the land the town was built on, informally

called Churchtown. In 1752, parishioners built a stone church with 30 pews. A new stone church replaced the older one in 1830, and this is the structure Bangor parishioners pray in today.

Legend says George Washington worshiped at Bangor in 1758 and again during the winter of 1777-78, while he stayed at Valley Forge. Scheneman, however, said he doesn't believe the story. The reverend, with help from congregants, is writing a history of the church that should be published by next summer.

The Revolutionary War brought problems. The reverend at the time, Thomas Barton, would not swear allegiance to the commonwealth of Pennsylvania and left the area. The church, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, had to close its doors until the war ended.

Bangor welcomed its largest congregation in the early decades of the 1800s, when members numbered well above 200. The number of parishioners declined after the nearby Poole Iron Forge closed in 1852.

Change came slowly here. The current church, completed in 1830 with 50 pews, had no space for bathrooms. Electricity arrived in the early 1900s, and bathrooms came in the 1990s. The small church still had no room for these facilities, so they occupy space in the nearby parish hall, which also has a kitchen, social area and of-



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Rev. Canon Mark Scheneman welcomes attendees during Bangor Episcopal Church's 300th Anniversary banquet at the Caernarvon Fire Company on Saturday.

MAJOR MOMENTS

One of the oldest churches in the country calls Narvon home. Bangor Episcopal Church was founded in 1722. The church took the name from Bangor Cathedral and the shire on Caernarvon in North Wales.

Here are some of the early highlights.

- **1726:** Representatives from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts visited the church.
- **1730:** William Penn granted the church land and a charter.
- **1774:** Tory minister expelled from church for supporting England.
- **1786:** Bangor Episcopal Church granted its first charter by the newly formed country. The church still operates under this charter.
- **1822:** First confirmation class.
- **1884:** Chapel added.
- **1896:** The 1,200-pound church bell installed.
- **1903:** First woman to participate in church leadership is elected treasurer.

SOURCE: BANGOR EPISCOPAL CHURCH RECORDS.

DID YOU KNOW?

Here are a few interesting facts about Bangor Church.

- Graves lie under the present church, and a stone still stands under the north vestry room floor.
- A Welsh bible given to the church was loaned to someone in April 1758 and was never returned.
- A formerly enslaved individual who served as a sexton for almost 50 years is buried in the cemetery.

SOURCE: BANGOR EPISCOPAL CHURCH RECORDS.

fices.

"You can't grow a church if all you have are outhouses," Scheneman said.

Bangor today

Ask parishioners what draws them to Bangor, and the answer usually includes references to warmth and friendship.

"I like that the people are really warm, and the congregation appears to really care for each other," Almon-Matangos said. She noted the church's community involvement, such as filling donated backpacks for school children, helping at a food bank and providing rides to parishioners who no longer drive.

Maurine Van Dyke joined the church about 35 years

ago. "It's a very unique church and a unique group of people," she said.

For instance, Bill Bryan can point to his house just a few steps from the church. He usually comes to services wearing blue jeans and bare feet. Bryan joined Bangor because it is close to him, and the people are friendly.

"It's nice to be able to walk to church and worship with neighbors," Bryan said.

Daniel and Lori Towle live across the street from Bangor. "It has a nice community feel," Lori Towle said.

Luci Brown would agree, even though she comes from farther away. Brown, in her 90s, attends with other residents of Garden Spot Village, a retirement community in New Holland. "The day we walked in here, we

felt like home," she said.

Mary Shirk of Narvon joined Bangor about six years ago after her nephew recommended the church. "We had a wonderful time," she said of the weekend celebration. "Everyone is extremely friendly."

Hannah Matangos said the deep commitment to outreach makes Bangor a bit different from other churches.

"This has been my church my whole life," Matangos said. "There's a saying that prayers work at Bangor. It's a special community."

Scheneman wants that idea to continue as the church now prepares for a homemade chili sale and holiday bazaar the first weekend in November and then a Thanksgiving Eve service.

"It always has been a matter of a small church trying to maintain a rich history," Scheneman said.