

St. Luke's First Place of Worship

Saint Luke's Lutheran Church, also known as The German Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of Saint Luke's, is a historic Lutheran church located on Restaurant Row at 308 West 46th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues in the Theater District of Manhattan, New York City.

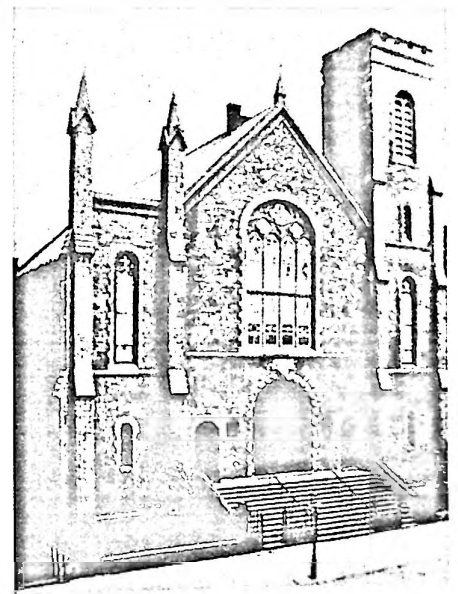
Saint Luke's Building & History.

The first sermon was preached by the Reverend William Drees, a native of Bentheim, Hanover Germany, who, on September 1, 1850, became Saint Luke's first

Pastor. Saint Luke's met in rented rooms on the third floor of a building on 35th Street and 9th Avenue. In 1861 more space was needed and the second floor of a larger house between 46th and 47th Streets on 8th Avenue was rented. In the spring of 1863, a vacant Baptist church on West 43rd Street was purchased and in June of that year, thirteen years after their formation, Saint Luke's realized its dream of worshiping in its own building. In 1875, the church moved again to 233 West 42nd Street, into the former Forty-second Street Presbyterian Church. With the expansion of 42nd Street as a main thoroughfare, and the beginning of it becoming the heart of the Theatre District, Saint Luke's decided to vacate its home and so the hunt began for the current property on 46th Street.

Saint Luke's Current Home.

Final services were held at the 42nd Street Church on January 1, 1922, and from this date on, while the new church was under construction, Sunday Services were held in rented space at the Selwyn Theater. The cornerstone of the new building was laid in October, 1922 and the church was dedicated in September, 1923. From its 42nd street location, Saint Luke's brought the two stained glass windows which had flanked the altar and placed them on the east wall of the new building. At this time, the church also acquired the four foot hand carved wooden figure of Christ mounted on the altar as well as the stained glass window set that extends the width of the building just above the main entrance.



Saint Luke's on West 42nd Street in the year 1900

The architecture has been described as a happy marriage between the Gothic Revival and Art Deco styles. A four-story parish house at 308-316 West 46th Street was also built in 1922.

On the occasion of the congregation's 100th anniversary in 1950, a Reformation folio containing homilies by Luther, Melancthon, Bugenhagen, Creuziger, Jonas, and Major was purchased and presented to Saint Luke's. Included in the folio is a brief homily in Martin Luther's own hand with the date of 1543.

In 1990, major renovation and restoration work was completed on the nave of the church, and a Walcker organ was installed. Over \$300,000 was needed for both projects and the work was

accomplished as the result of a major fund raising program. A generous bequest allowed for the complete renovation of the lounge and meeting room in 1999.

In 2007, Saint Luke's was added to the National Registry of Historic Places. Also in 2007, a Columbarium for members and friends wishing to have their cremated remains interred within the church was dedicated and placed in the southwest area of the nave behind the pulpit. The church has been involved with the New York Historical Society's Sacred Sites for the last several years, hosting tours of the Sanctuary on a Saturday in May.

Today, Saint Luke's Theatre, a 199 seat Off-Broadway theatre rents space in Saint Luke's former Parish Hall, which now serves as its soup kitchen 2 days a week and hosts a clothing bank once a month, as well as the Annual Soup Kitchen Benefit: Soup du Jour, each November, where members and friends of the congregation perform to a packed house. The offices of the theatre are located inside the former bowling alley. The Family West School, an award-winning Montessori pre-K school, operates in the former gymnasium. Yaddo, a non-profit arts group, occupies a portion of the third floor, which, for many years housed Lutheran Social Services' Immigration offices.

Saint Luke's Synodical History.

A few months before Drees arrived in the States, a small Dutch Reformed Church had been organized by the Reverend Friedrich Busche on the West side of Manhattan. Within a month of Drees' arrival, Reverend Busche accepted a call to take over the Reformed Church of Forsythe Street, and within the same year, after Drees was asked to take over the mission, he accepted the call to become the settled pastor. Only three years later, dealing with a contentious church council, Drees was asked to resign under the stipulation that it would be private and, because the council feared the congregation, asked Drees not to inform the congregation. Drees refused, so council fired him, hired another preacher and started the service a half hour earlier, posting police at the door to keep Reverend Drees out. Forcing his way in, Drees said it was his obligation to preach. Now becoming a public matter, half of the congregation walked out the door to follow Drees, who preached his first sermon on September 1, 1850, and thus Saint Luke's was formed.

Saint Luke's was originally a Dutch Reformed Church, but reorganized as a Lutheran congregation in 1853, when it joined the New York Ministerium, shortly after Drees had, and under its constitution became a Lutheran congregation. In 1859, Saint Luke's adopted as its legal name The German Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of Saint Luke's. In 1880, Saint Luke's resigned from the New York Ministerium and became an independent congregation without any synodical affiliation. The congregation remained independent until 1987 when it joined the newly established Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Saint Luke's Pastor History.

Often referred to as a "small, but mighty congregation", Saint Luke's has the distinction of only having had 8 pastors in its close to 170 year history.

1850-1870: Founding Pastor William Drees. In 1870, revisions to the constitution were enacted to deal with the increased workload caused by the church's expansion. Pastor Drees took exception to a segment which provided for a layperson to chair the congregation, and just as suddenly as he started the church, he tendered his resignation in June of 1870.

1871-1874: Pastor William Buettner. During his pastorate, the Ladies Aid Society was organized and remained an active organization for over 130 years, disbanding in 2002 after a decision by the women of Saint Luke's not to have an exclusive women's society. Pastor Buettner resigned in 1874, due to controversies surrounding inappropriate behavior. This did not affect his ministry, because some of the congregation left with him and he went on to great success in another church.



1874-1899: Pastor William Busse, who passed away shortly after celebrating his 25 years of service.

1900-1935: Pastor William Koepchen, who served until his death. Albert Neibacher, who was hired the year before, as Pastor Koepchen's assistant, was installed as the 5th settled pastor on November 15, 1936.



1936-1974: Pastor Albert Neibacher. Pastor Neibacher retired in 1974.

1975-2000: Pastor Dale Hansen. Pastor Hansen found the 46th Street area in disrepair, populated by prostitutes and drug dealers, and in need of a major overhaul. The prostitute and drug problem was addressed by calling on the Guardian Angels, who patrolled the street and helped provide the neighborhood with some security. Pastor Hansen worked with the 46th Street restaurant owners, the mayor and city planners to design and implement a traffic and pedestrian friendly street, thus creating what is today known as "Restaurant Row". In 1977, Saint Luke's began its Soup Kitchen, which continues unabated, even during the Coronavirus pandemic. Pastor Hansen retired in 2000.

2000-2018: Pastor Paul Schmiede, who at the time was pastor of Saint Anne's Lutheran Church in London, England, was called and returned to the United States to become Saint Luke's seventh pastor. Winter and summer retreats were introduced in 2001 and continue to the present day. They have become an important time of renewal, worship, study, and fellowship, and have become anticipated events every winter and summer.

Pastor Schmiede retired and preached his last sermon on January 7, 2018. A big celebration was held, immediately after the service at the legendary Barbetta's restaurant across the street. A Call Committee was formed and an interim pastor was hired and began right in the middle of Lent. The Reverend Pastor Arden Strasser had to hit the ground running and it soon became evident that he and the mission of Saint Luke's were well-aligned, but the Call Committee was informed that they could not even consider Pastor Strasser as a candidate. They were later corrected of this notion when the new Bishop, Paul Egensteiner was elected. Pastor Strasser was then entered into the pool of candidates, was recommended by the Call Committee and was voted in as Saint Luke's 8th settled Pastor on November 10, 2019.



Challenges for the future.

The challenges that face Saint Luke's have been, historically, being able to move forward on big projects and to implement changes. For many years, as well, there was contention between the synod and the church. Many in the church were not even aware of

our affiliation. With the arrival of Pastor Strasser, the synod connection has become much stronger, due to Pastor Strasser's visible presence in several roles in the synod. Pastor Strasser has also led the way on several major projects, being able to match the congregation's fund-raising with matching money from the synod. Because of this, our Parsonage was completely renovated in preparation for the settled pastor, the Narthex restored to its former glory, and currently, the Sanctuary molding and stenciling repaired from several major leaks over the years. As we approach the 100th Anniversary of our building, we are working on our building's punch list and preparing for the year-long celebration that will commence in 1923. We are actively reasserting that our ministry does not just take place under the roof at 308 West 46th Street, but must include our surrounding neighborhood and its inhabitants as part of the mission that we are "in the city for good".



David Lally
April 23, 2020