Executive and Island Council Members, clergy, invited guests, and parishioners attended the re-dedication celebration of service at Bethel Methodist Church.

ST. EUSTATIUS—Bethel Methodist Church is known for its uplifting style of worship with occasional foot-tapping hymns. Sunday’s special service to celebrate the restoration of the church building was no exception. Led by Reverend Vincita Celestone, the service was attended by regular worshippers, as well as leaders of other religious denominations and many local politicians.

Entitled Service of Thanksgiving and Rededication, the event equally celebrated 173 years of existence. The church has a fascinating history as Sister Jeanette Farrel-Philip explained.

The existing building was destroyed by the earthquake of February 8, 1848. Within a space of ten months, the local congregation worked hard to rebuild the church. Historian Walter Hellebrand provided details of how the rebuilding was completed. Then, age and weather have conspired to prompt new renovation works. With foresight of such expensive outlays, Reverend James C. Richardson made a difficult decision in 2002 to charge a burial fee. A loan from the National Restoration Fund was also secured with Hellebrand’s assistance in his capacity as Monuments Director to top-up the necessary financing. As a listed monument, the building qualifies for the special restoration loans that come with an interest of only two per cent payable over 20 years.

Many improvements to the visual and structural interior of the church have been achieved. However, the restoration is not still complete. The next phase involves the repair of the belty, external walkways and eventually the chancel.

The current works have been undertaken in only eight months. “Like the church of 1848, the Methodist congregation has quick to rebuild its place of worship. This also says something about the general enthusiasm of the Methodist church movement everywhere and throughout time,” Reverend Celestone commented. She noted that creating a Methodist foothold on the “Historic Gem” has not always been without challenges. Much attention was paid to Black Harry, a slave who purchased the church movement on the island.

“Expelled in the 18th century for the act of worship, and later to foster the roots of our church. His legacy lives on,” she said. Black Harry was reincarnated during the service in an inspired dramatization by Christina Timber-Glover. Her characterization and verse were eagerly applauded.

Equally appreciated was the choral contribution from the 20-member Senior Bethel Choir. Their rendition of “Bless This House” was an appropriate choice for the occasion. The Children’s Choir added further charm for the benefit of a full congregation.

Local politicians were also present to celebrate the occasion. Island Council Member for Democratic Party (DP) Adelka Spanner congratulated the Methodist community for its contribution to the island through the years.

“The building is the oldest church on the island,” she noted. “And the Methodist movement has given children an excellent educational start to their lives.” Spanner also related her fondness as a child for the sound of its church bells and the annual candlelight services during the Christmas period.

In his address to the congregation, fraction leader of Progressive Labour Party (PLP) Clyde van Putten shared similar gratulations. “This chapel has played an important educational role as a kindergarten,” he said. “We live in difficult times and the church continues to provide a beacon of hope. I therefore look forward with excitement to the Methodist Conference to be held on the island in January 2017.”

Rev. Joyce Leerdam (PLP) also represented the Island Council, alongside Commissioner Derrick Simmonds and the newly appointed Commissioner Charles Woodley for the Executive Council.

In her sermon, Reverend Celestone gave a powerful tribute to all individuals who made the renovation work possible. “We now have a little cathedral and our mission is to minister to the needs of the younger generation,” she concluded.