

*THE HISTORY OF  
ST. MARY'S LUTHERAN COMMUNITY CHURCH /  
TREE OF LIFE LUTHERAN CHURCH*



**As Written by Paul Schuler for the Occasion of  
Tree of Life Lutheran Church's 25th Anniversary  
May 2016**

## Introduction. A Journey

The history of Tree of Life (TOL) Lutheran Church goes back at least to July of 1988 and the appointment of the DELMARVA Conference Ministry Planning Commission to determine the feasibility of beginning a Lutheran ministry in the Middletown, Odessa, & Townsend area. There follows a tale of struggle to find funding and to puzzle through how to best grow and develop a Lutheran congregation in this area.

My personal journey into the history of Tree of Life began when my wife, Linda, and I became members of Tree of Life in 2014. I had done some work on the history of our previous congregation in Pennsylvania and inquired into the history of Tree of Life. I was told there was a timeline of history which ended in 2010. I suggested that I might like to try to bring that history up to date. Other events in my life distracted me for awhile, but when I finally got around to finding that timeline and reading it, I realized that we were about to celebrate a milestone in 2016 – the 25th Anniversary of the first service for our congregation. At the time, I was given to believe that no other histories of Tree of Life existed except that somewhat sketchy timeline. When Pastor Tim Leitzke preached his last sermon at TOL in 2015, he referred to the historical timeline and expressed a hope that someone would be able to fill in some of its gaps.

Part of my plan was to speak to Peggy Jahn. She had been a founding member and was a resident of the same Middletown development where my wife and I live. Sorrowfully, Peggy passed away in 2015 before I was able to speak with her. I have spent the past few months looking through Tree of Life's records and making notes. In doing so, I found a miracle – a blessing from heaven and a gift from Peggy Jahn. In the August, 2009 issue of *The Leaflet* (TOL's monthly newsletter) was Peggy's article on the history of Tree of Life 1991-2009. I have included her article in full in this booklet.

I was also blessed to find a history written by Jim Raun, another founding member of Tree of Life. It covers TOL's very early history. I have inserted Jim's history in its entirety into my narrative in Part 1. It is in italics. These histories and several historical summaries have been invaluable in my effort to fill in some of the gaps in the timeline.

Tree of Life has had its ups and downs. Part of my challenge was to highlight the most important milestones and events and to celebrate the positive without ignoring the negative. Many of the current members of TOL have been with us almost from the start and several are charter members. I am documenting their personal experiences. Thanks to Donna Parks and other members of TOL for proof-reading and commenting on this history.

## **Part 1. A Brief Early History by James Raun:**

*The DELMARVA Conference Ministry Planning Committee was appointed in July, 1988. The charge was "to study and evaluate potential mission and ministry opportunities in our area." The identification of the Middletown area was first introduced to the Conference Planning Committee on Dec. 7, 1988 (by David Blackwelder and Jim Raun independent of each other). In the Fall, 1989, a Preliminary Information on Proposed Fields for 1989-1990 was submitted to the ELCA Region 8 Mission Director for transmittal to the ELCA Division of Outreach. Subsequently, the Conference Planning Committee was informed that the Division of Outreach did not have funds to support mission development at Middletown.*

*At the Nov. 12, 1990 Conference Planning Committee meeting a subcommittee consisting of David Blackwelder, Greg Johnson and Jim Raun was appointed to design a plan or strategy to initiate a ministry in the Middletown area. The plan was reported to the Conference Committee.*

*A meeting including members of the Conference Committee was held with the Rev. William Tromboe, Rector, St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Middletown, DE. Rev. Tromboe had earlier suggested to David Blackwelder that St. Anne's facilities were available to assist in the formation of a Lutheran congregation.*

*With that assistance, services have been held in a lovely small chapel at St. Anne's. The first worship service, led by the Rev. David Blackwelder and the Rev. Greg Johnson was held on May 19, 1991. Additional services, led by the Rev. David Blackwelder, were held on June 30 and August 11, 1991.*

## **Part 2. The Story Continues**

As early as June of 1990, Reverend Johnson sent six persons a letter inviting them to a meeting at Pastor Blackwelder's house to discuss the possibility of starting a Lutheran mission congregation in Middletown, Delaware. The meeting was held at 405 South Broad Street, Old Route 896. To help identify the house and to encourage participation it was noted the meeting would be at the only house with the red awning and dessert would be served. The meeting was held July 29, 1990 and out of that meeting came the proposal to the Delmarva Conference Ministry Planning Committee and the November 12, 1990 Conference Planning Committee meeting.

At the time it was estimated that there may be about 50 Lutherans in the MOT area with possibly another 50 coming into the area in the next few years. This is based on population

numbers and estimates and the estimate that 1% of the population would be or become Lutheran.

It was clear that there were misgivings about the potential of starting a new Lutheran ministry in this area. Since funding was not available, any mission church would be dependent upon the grace of and gifts from existing Lutheran churches.

That first worship service on May 19, 1991 was held at 2:00 P.M. on Pentecost Sunday with 12 adults and three children in attendance. An announcement had previously been placed in *The Middletown Transcript* inviting people to this service. The attending adults were Jim Raun, his wife, Mary Raun, Rev. David Blackwelder, Theda Blackwelder, Rev. Greg Johnson, Mary Ellen Raun, Janet Parks, Donna Parks, Janet Ann Parks, Sylvia Schill, Dot Schreppler and Charles Schreppler. Subsequent services were held on June 30 and August 11, 1991.

Then on August 27th, 1991, Pastors Blackwelder and Johnson met with interested persons to assess the feasibility of starting a mission. Attending the meeting were Rev. David Blackwelder, Rev. Greg Johnson, Mrs. Karen Marchand, Mrs. Janet Parks, Ms. Mary Ellen Raun, Mary and Jim Raun, and Dot and Charles Schreppler. Starting a mission was discussed. A Steering Committee was appointed, consisting of Jim Raun (chair), Dot Schreppler (Treasurer), and Karen Marchand.

This was also a time of historic meetings between local Lutheran and Episcopal clergy, who agreed to participate in one another's communion services, based on an earlier agreement on a national level to share in the Eucharist between the Lutheran and Episcopal churches.

Rev. William Tromboe, Rector, at St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Middletown, offered to allow the small Lutheran community to worship in St. Anne's Barr Chapel at no cost for weekly services. St. Anne's told us that we were viewed as a mission outreach. Although they suggested that perhaps we could share the costs of flowers



**St. Anne's Episcopal Church  
15 E. Green Street, Middletown**

and perhaps host some social hours following the services, this was not an expectation. We were able to begin worshipping every Sunday starting January 2, 1992.

Our congregation's early survival was dependent upon the generosity of other churches. Our records show many contributions of money and material from various Lutheran churches both within the Delaware-Maryland Synod and from outside the Synod. Also, our finances were beginning to be handled through Hope Lutheran Church, New Castle, DE, where Rev. Dr. Jane Shields was Pastor.

Very early 'official' references to our congregation called us "Middletown-Odessa-Townsend Lutheran Community". But on June 2 of 1992 we adopted the name "St. Mary's Lutheran Community". Technically, we were not a "Church" or even a "Mission Church". To be recognized as a Lutheran church, our community had to grow in size and show evidence of outreach, evangelism, and an ability to grow to be self-supporting – a difficult task when we were not even a "Church".

### **Part 3. St. Mary's Lutheran Community Church**

Of course, we believed we were a "Church". We were a group of faithful Christians worshipping together and desiring to reach out into the community to offer a Lutheran experience to the MOT area. We had adopted the name "St. Mary's" in honor of the Mother of our Lord. But we were also worshipping at St. Anne's. Traditionally, St. Anne was Mary's mother. There is also evidence that the name was chosen partly in memory of Mary Raun, one of our founders.

We were able, on June 11 of 1992 to call Rev. C. Roger Burkins as our part-time minister. Then in September, we initiated plans for a covenant agreement with Hope Lutheran Church, and by November we were producing our first newsletter - the *St. Mary's Chronicle*.

After Pastor Burkins left in September of 1992, St. Mary's was served by a number of supply Pastors until Seminarian Greg Frey began his internship on May 23 of 1993. Also in 1993, Dr. Jarrett Hansen, the Regional Mission Director, Pastor Jane Shields, Pastor John Keating and Jim Raun formed a committee to devise a plan for developing St. Mary's into an official ministry in the MOT area.

By the summer of 1994, it was apparent that we had a shortfall of funds and expected little or no income from outside sources, but we managed to survive and we hired Seminarian Elsa Clark, an intern, on August 15. By September, a review of finances showed that we could carry on at least until early 1995. In fact, we were now outgrowing the Chapel at St. Anne's.

We were able to afford a rental payment and on December 1, moved from St. Anne's to "The Old Bike Shop" at 1 South Broad Street in Middletown. We were now a 'store front' church. Bishop George Mocko conducted a Service of Blessing of the new facility on December 4th of 1994.

December was an important month for St. Mary's. Not only did we move, but The Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in McLean, Virginia, selected us as their mission partner. Over the years St. Mary's/TOL has received many gifts, including funding, from the Church of the Redeemer.



**1 S. Broad Street, Middletown**

Late 1994 and early 1995 saw the formation of a Worship and Music Committee, the beginning of a Sunday School, the formation of a Youth Group by Seminarian Clark, and the adoption of an "Invitational" evangelism program. This program included thinking about how we greet one another and visitors within our facility as well as outreach initiatives, such as door-to-door

witnessing, public relations, and follow-up contact with our visitors. A calendar of evangelism activities and events was adopted which included such items as coffee fellowship, neighbor canvassing, evangelism workshops, and signage. In April, the first of several 'Bring a Friend' Sundays was held. Because of its obvious commitment to growth, St. Mary's began to receive mission support funding from Delaware-Maryland Synod Outreach in February of 1995.

A key event was the Covenant Agreement St. Mary's made with Hope Lutheran Church on February 15th of 1995. With this agreement, the members of St. Mary's would be made associate members of Hope and St. Mary's would function as a Task Force of Hope's church council. The plan was that once St. Mary's was established as a church in its own right, all



membership records and other records pertaining to our members would be officially transferred to St. Mary's.

During 1995, discussions were held with Hope Lutheran which detailed the actual relationship that would exist between Hope and St. Mary's. The record shows that there were certainly misunderstandings and differences in philosophies. During most of 1995, the members of St. Mary's congregation were officially still members of their former home congregations. Our archives contain numerous letters and memos between St. Mary's and the Synod questioning and clarifying exactly what the relationship was among St. Mary's, Hope, and the Synod, particularly where the responsibility of providing liability insurance lay.

Nevertheless, there was an agreement for joint confirmation classes between Hope and St. Mary's and on June 4th of 1995, two youth from St. Mary's (Cameron Knauer & Erin Marchand) were confirmed. Because of this, Cameron and Erin were the first persons to be officially placed on the St. Mary's roster of associate members of Hope Lutheran Church. The uncertainties of our relationship with Hope did not deter us from forwarding our first monthly benevolence offering to the Synod in 1995. In June, we also began receiving mail at our Broad Street address instead of at a post office box number. While this appears to be minor, having our own official mailing address helped us establish our identity within the MOT community. We also held our first Vacation Bible School and distributed flyers to the community as part of our first evangelism effort.



**Confirmation of  
Cameron Knauer & Erin Marchand**

Elsa Clark left us in August, but on September 1st, Rev. Norman Minich began as our interim Pastor. He was formally designated as a 'mission developer', although St. Mary's had not yet reached official mission status. Under Rev. Minich's guidance, we began to put together an application for program support from the Synod. The application contained a brief history, regional demographics for the MOT area, and St. Mary's objectives for 1996.

On December 3rd of 1995, all of St. Mary's members officially became associate members of Hope Lutheran Church in a Service of Celebration.

There is actually little specifically recorded for St. Mary's for 1996, 1997, and 1998. Our youth won fourth prize in 1995 for their float in the Middletown Christmas Parade (Youth Category). Then, in the 1996 parade, they won second prize for their float depicting Noah's Ark. The Quilter's, led by Joann Minich, held their first meeting on January 18th of 1996. They provided quilts for Lutheran World Relief and domestic disasters. On April 6th, the first "Spruce Up" Sunday was held.



**TOL Youth on Their Prize-Winning Float  
1996**

This was a period of relative stability for St. Mary's, but that is not necessarily a good thing. We always had an eye towards calling a permanent pastor and finding a permanent place of worship. We survived in part due to the generosity of other congregations. In fact, in May of 1997, Pastor Minich pointed out to the congregation that there really was not much in the way of growth during his then 16 months of service at St. Mary's and that a new approach would need to be taken. Without evidence of growth, there was a risk that our mission partners and the Synod would begin to withdraw support. Growth problems were discussed,

the primary ones being a 'store-front' church, and a dislocation from current housing developments. One memo noted that although there were many ideas bandied about, perhaps a lack of timely follow-through was a problem. We had been talking and planning for some years to begin a "telemarketing" campaign, which we finally began late in 1997.



**Display of Quilts for Lutheran World Relief**

To reach official mission church status, St. Mary's had to present evidence that it was conforming to ELCA and Synodical rules and guidelines pertaining to growth, outreach, and evangelism. The question was how we could receive



all the financial and guidance benefits of being an official Synod and ELCA member with limited resources to begin with.

The year 1998 saw a turnover in ministerial assistance. Rev. Minich had completed his interim on June 30 and Rev. Burkins returned as part-time mission developer on July 1. We also hired Skip Platt as a lay minister on June 15. Rev. Burkins and Skip Platt were installed as ministers of St. Mary's in October.

We faced a deficit by the end of 1998 and a plea was made for additional funding from the congregation. We had been able, however, to hire a nursery attendant in February and in April of 1998, we were able to offer communion twice a month, the first step in what was becoming common practice in the ELCA – to offer it at every service.

Despite problems in 1998, 1999 proved to be a banner year for St. Mary's. The Youth Group, which had been floundering, was reactivated and in February, we initiated steps to complete our Ministry Plan, which was necessary to apply for official membership in the ELCA and the Delaware-Maryland Synod.

Events move rather quickly in 1999. On March 31 there was an organizational planning meeting with Rev. Dr. Jerrett Hansen and we opened the Charter for signing on April 18. Anyone, adult or child, baptized in a Christian church, was eligible for signing the charter, signifying a desire to be members of St. Mary's. There was a Pre-Organizational Congregational Meeting on April 25, 1999. We adopted a Constitution and Bylaws, wrote a new Mission Statement and elected a Council. We voted to incorporate, to apply for membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, to call a full-time Pastor-Mission Developer, and to adopt St. Mary's Evangelical Lutheran Church as the legal name.

We had changed our Mission Statement from:

*“Called by the Holy Spirit, redeemed by Jesus Christ, the people of St. Mary's Lutheran Church covenant to witness to God's presence by preaching the word, administering the sacraments and serving God's people by acts of love and through advocacy of Justice.”*  
to

*“Through the Grace of God, called by the Holy Spirit to our common faith in Jesus Christ and nourished by word and Sacrament, we the people of St. Mary's Lutheran Church commit ourselves to growth in the Gospel.”*

We were incorporated on May 13th of 1999, received as an official member congregation of the Delaware-Maryland Synod on June 11th and held our Service of Recognition on June 29th of 1999. At that service, we were officially recognized as a congregation of the ELCA and given a certificate of Recognition by the same.

## **Part 4. Tree of Life Lutheran Church**

As early as 1997, the Delaware-Maryland Synod had indicated (sometimes through some correspondence with Rev. Minich) that the name “St. Mary’s” might be misleading – that is, it might be too “Catholic”, and that Lutherans in the MOT area might not be attracted to St. Mary’s because of the name. The Synod had also expressed concern that our more conservative style of worship might also be a factor that would slow our growth in an area the Synod considered a rich area for a Lutheran mission. The name of our congregation and our worship style was, unfortunately, to become a somewhat contentious issue.

In January of 2000 Rev. Russell Scott began as our full-time Pastor / mission developer. During his time here our congregation clearly struggled with several issues, including the inclusion of a contemporary service, but fundamentally, struggling with mission and outreach. That is, how to reach out to the community and grow as a congregation without losing our identity.

Rev. Scott was very insistent that St. Mary’s must change its name, create a second service, and that the second service be contemporary. His insistence met with resistance.

Nevertheless, in July of 2000, St. Mary’s changed its name to Tree of Life Lutheran Church. This was a hard decision on the part of the congregation and was done to reflect the idea that we must reach out to the community in a way that makes them most comfortable. Not everyone agreed with this approach, of course, especially since the name St. Mary was chosen partially in honor of not only Mary, the Mother of Jesus, but in memory of Mary Raun. However, Pastor Scott had reported to the congregation that Mary Raun’s husband, Jim, was the person who first suggested “Tree of Life”. Jim Raun had written a letter back in 1995 to Bishop Mocko of the Delaware-Maryland Synod, wherein Jim explained that the name St. Mary’s was chosen first and only then did someone mention the connection between that name and Jim’s wife, Mary.

During 2000 and 2001 the issue of the congregation’s name change, the inclusion of a contemporary service, and the inclusion of a second service was not well received by many members of the congregation, who felt that too many changes were being instituted too rapidly. As a result, membership, attendance, and giving fell. Then in October of 2001 Rev. Russell Scott resigned.

On November 1st of 2001 Rev. Minich returned as part-time interim. This was a time of healing. Pastor Minich encouraged us to adopt more formal procedures and methods. For example, we purchased a fireproof cabinet to store the important paperwork that Pastor Minich had been storing in his own house. There was much discussion about expansion and

the need for a permanent place of worship that would indicate to a doubting Synodical Division of Outreach that Tree of Life was here to stay.

Pastor Minich left in August of 2003 and, in spite of our financial struggles, we were able to call a full time pastor on November 1 of 2003 – Rev. Jennifer Carlson. She was formally installed on February 29, 2004.

During Pastor Carlson's ministry we began to use a new liturgical service with songs from the "With One Voice" songbook – many of these songs were considered to be more "upbeat". We held our first "Blessing of the Animals" service in October of 2004. We also received many monetary gifts from other Lutheran churches and the Synod. Much of this money was set aside for the purchase of land and the construction of our own building. We were still struggling with the problem of physical expansion. This was considered by the congregation to be essential to growth but was also strongly encouraged by the Synod. The records show, however, that available land often became sold before we were able to obtain the approvals and financial resources to purchase it.

On November 21st, 2004, we held a "Generosity Sunday". We had been operating at a loss and instituted the idea that everyone try to focus their giving – possibly giving up some small personal treats and giving more to Tree of Life's ministries. The preacher for Generosity Sunday was Rev. Dr. W. George Evans, Jr., Pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, which had annually supported Tree of Life through monetary and other gifts for the past nine years. There was no evidence that the congregation was not already generously giving. The only way to meet financial obligations was to grow.

During 2005, the issue of instituting a second, contemporary service was raised again. It was decided (since the purpose of the second service was to make worship more available to outsiders) that rather than add a second service, existing members would be asked to make parking spaces closer to the building and seats toward the rear of the worship area more accessible to visitors, late comers, and families with small children.

It is clear that the congregation was outgrowing its worship space. The Broad Street store front did not appear to say 'church' to people moving into the area. There was a comment in a note that if one person uses the microwave and another starts the copy machine, then the power goes out. Though finding our own land was a problem, something had to be done.

For the second time, Tree of Life had to search out and find another place to worship.

## Part 5. A Church On a Truck

During July of 2006, Tree of Life moved its worship area from Broad Street to Brick Mill Elementary School, where we had more worship space. The Broad Street store front was still our ministry center, but we had to haul many items between the Broad Street location and the Elementary School. We were worshipping in an auditorium – a Gym. We called ourselves a Church on a Truck, Nomads, and Wanderers. We rearranged the seating several times and struggled with odd problems, such as where to place the altar – under the basketball net seemed inappropriate.

In late 2006, we were fortunate enough to be able to begin the use of a new sound system and new keyboard.

It's clear that during these years, there was much discussion concerning growth and mission. Some wanted to focus on the potential for growth, which meant moving to larger spaces, in particular Tree of Life's own building, while others felt that growth meant mission, evangelism and outreach as a first priority, and then physical growth, if possible. Although very often our projected expenses exceeded our projected income, we were receiving grants from the Synod and monetary contributions from other congregations. One of the real problems was a difficulty in locating an institution that would loan us money for both land purchase and development of that land.

It needs to be noted that despite its growth and financial problem, St. Mary's / Tree of Life did not neglect to provide for others. It participated in food pantries, collected mittens, hats, and scarves for needy children, provided quilts for Lutheran World Relief, and participated in many community activities, including Christmas caroling. In fact, March 16th of 2007 was the first distribution of the Grocery Club – a program designed to help families in our area by supplementing their monthly grocery needs – a program which still continues today, along with each year “adopting” a needy family in the area and providing them with Christmas gifts.



**Brick Mill Elementary School  
378 Brick Mill Road, Middletown**

Other events in 2007 should be noted. In June our youth raised money to attend an event in Ocean City, MD, focusing on environmental issues. The seniors group, formerly called the “Tree of Life Seniors” (TOLS), became known as the Older, Wiser, Lutheran Seniors or OWLS. In August we moved our Ministry Center from 1 South Broad Street to 211 North Broad Street. The new Ministry Center was dedicated on December 9th. Because we could only worship at Brick Mill on Sundays, we held special services, such as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, at the new North Broad Street location. Our ordained staff also changed in 2007. Pastor Carlson accepted a new call and Rev. Wesley Hamlin began as a part-time interim minister in the fall.

The 2007 Stewardship Campaign demonstrated Tree of Life’s commitment to God’s work by increasing its pledges by over 16%. Still, our year-end 2006 expenses had been more than \$14,000 over budget. And the 2007 budget was projected to be \$20,000 greater than the projected income. That projection included a \$30,000 Synod Grant. But the dream of a permanent worship location was still within our grasp.

The year 2008 was another year of ‘stability’ for Tree of Life as they diligently searched for a permanent place of worship. TOL formed a Call Committee in the summer because we clearly needed full-time ministerial leadership.

Through the diligence and patience of its members and the Grace of God, Tree of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church was able to purchase its first land and building at 505 Osbourne Street in Odessa on June 30th, 2009. That building, which was to serve as both the worship area and ministry center, would need much renovation.

The property purchased by Tree of Life was of great historic value. The building had once been a day care center and previously the home of several families either through purchase or inheritance. When one first looked at this building, whose original center portion had been a school house built by Pierre S. DuPont for children of African Americans and dated back to the 1920’s, it was difficult to imagine this much-added-onto, decaying building being turned into a church. The booklet “*That Old Bat Church*” by *Marcia Rae Wheeler* contains an expansion of the history of our property.

The original plans called for the renovation at 505 Osbourne to be completed by September and the first service to be held in October of 2009. There were plans to add a new sanctuary in 2012. In anticipation of monetary needs, in July Tree of Life began the “Through Our Love” Capital Campaign – hoping to raise over \$600,000 and increase membership attendance to 100 within three years. In September, the ministry center at 211 N. Broad Street was closed and the essential contents of the Office at the Ministry Center temporarily moved to the home of a member family, the Saleminks.



Plans are just that - plans. The renovation of the newly purchased building took much longer than expected. It was a struggle to get a construction and then an occupation permit. The construction permit was not granted until March, 2010 and contract work was not begun until April 19, 2010. There was also much work to be done by Tree of Life members to prepare the space for worship.

After many months of hard work cleaning, tearing down walls, cleaning, pulling up carpet, cleaning, replacing areas of the roof, re-wiring, painting, painting and more painting, cleaning, clearing out overgrown trees and weeds, and removing old sofas, rocks, and bricks found in the overgrowth, the diligent members of Tree of Life saw the project through to its end.

During the busy year of 2010, our youth hosted the first FAT Tuesday Pancake Supper, we hired our first part-time office assistant, and the assistant minister (formerly called the 'reader') was given the responsibility of also reading the Prayers of Intercession. Rev. Hamlin retired in the Fall of 2010 and, since we were then served by supply pastors, the acolytes and assistant ministers began sitting up front with the pastor, to help guide him or her through the service. Before he left, Pastor Hamlin had us set up a Mutual Ministry Committee to help the lay members and future Pastors work together to meet the goals of the congregation.



**Tree of Life's Current Location before Renovation  
505 Osbourne Street, Odessa**

Late in November of 2010, we received the permit to move into our new facility. After more hard work of preparation, on December 5th, 2010 we finally held the first worship service in our own building!

## **Part 6. Nomads No More**

The dedication of our new building was held Palm Sunday, April 17th, 2011. Wolfgang Herz-Lane, Bishop of the Delaware-Maryland Synod preached and led the service. An Open House was held after the service. Also in April, 2011 Pastor John Little was (assigned / hired) as Minister of Pastoral Care.

On September 11, 2011 we began to use the “Red” hymnals, a new bulletin format, and our hymn boards. Various bulletin formats were tried. Too much information in the bulletin itself made for large bulletins, which were costly, but too little information meant that the congregation would need to go back and forth between the bulletin and the hymnal. This might have been confusing for visitors. The previous practice of printing the hymns in the bulletin was abandoned in favor of simply referring to the hymn number in the new hymnals.

On October 21, 2011, we held the Annual Outdoor Fall Festival at the fire pit outside of our own building, on our own grounds. In November, Pastor Tim Leitzke was called to be our Pastor. With financial aid from the Synod, he was hired to serve at half-time salary. He was installed December 18th.

In April of 2012, the congregation of Oasis of Love, under the direction of Rev. Marisol Melendez, began renting space from Tree of Life. They bring their own supplies (as we used to do) and use our sanctuary and kitchen area on Sundays from 4 to 7 p.m. As we once were hosted by another church we were now in our own church home and able to return the favor to another congregation.

2012 also saw changes to the worship area. On Easter Sunday the baptismal font was placed at the main entrance to the sanctuary and we acquired our first paschal candle and candlestick. We were still working on the appearance of the outside of our building. We wanted to make it appear more like a place of worship. We wanted people in the community to know who we were and where we were. We erected new signage and purchased decals to place on our cars.

Our attendance and giving were growing, so in February of 2013, we were able to approve a salary increase for Pastor Leitzke. We were also able to purchase a new electronic, digital piano.

In March, St. Paul's Methodist, Oasis of Love and Tree of Life held a joint Easter Vigil Service - a first for TOL. We hired Duane Dillard, our current Music Director. Duane had been with us before as music director from the summer of 2005 to 2007. Previously, TOL was served by music directors Bob Christ from February of 2009 until February of 2011 and Arreon Harley from July of 2011 until March of 2013.

In 2013, members of Tree of Life began to seriously discuss the issue of how to best transition from a small congregation to a larger one. There was the question of whether we wanted to do this at all. Where was God leading us? What growth, if any, should we seek? And how should we seek it? Were we ready to grow and accept the changes that would be necessary to allow us to grow?

One item that facilitated growth was completed in 2013. We obtained the permits necessary for the construction of a new building façade and in December the construction of the steeple was completed. One more step in 'looking' like a church.

In November of 2013, we had ascertained that we were outgrowing our new space. This always feels like a mixed blessing to congregations. Growing would mean acquiring resources that we could not afford until we grew! November also found our congregation searching for a way to be able to pay Pastor Tim for full-time service while finding a more formal way to determine exactly what our congregation's expectations were of a full time pastor.

The winter of 2013-2014 was harsh and TOL's facilities suffered costly damage. In addition, the weather had kept members away and giving was down. We could not find the means to pay a full-time salary to the Pastor and many members of our congregation were disappointed.

Because space, particularly parking space, was becoming limited, we went to two services on Easter Day in April of 2014. This was a convenience for some members, but there was a concern that we were splitting into two congregations. We were not able to pay the Music Director, Duane, to play at both services, so music used at the earlier service was "canned" music and initiated through a computer.

Although expenses were being met and the weather damaged roof was replaced, there was no extra money for salary increases, there was no increase in Benevolences, and no new outreach programs were instituted. How to deal with this, and, particularly, where to spend money were, unfortunately, contentious issues and by May, both membership and giving were down. We also no longer had a salaried Administrator.

## **Part 7. With the Grace of God, Tree of Life Carries On – Today and Tomorrow**

Problems did not halt progress at Tree of Life. Gene Zeiser designed and constructed the surround for the electronic digital piano. By August of 2014 the new façade was virtually complete with steeple and cross. By the end of 2014, a new roof had been installed and funding for new gutters and downspouts was in place. Plans for two memorial stained glass windows were also in place.

Between the summer of 2014 and the summer of 2015, due to increased expenses and some decrease in giving, the congregation was starting to have issues meeting monthly expenses. We had to dip into funds that had been specially marked for other uses. By September, TOL was just meeting its expenses week-to-week.

In June and July of 2015 our congregation decided to re-focus our mission on both younger families and the many over 55 communities in the MOT area. A multi-step, structured program for accomplishing this was developed.

Also, in July of 2015, after many delays by the manufacturer, the Fred Jahn memorial stained glass window was installed and dedicated. After the passing of Peggy Jahn in October of 2015, the window was renamed the Peg and Fred Jahn Memorial window. Then in November we installed and dedicated the Charles Schreppler Memorial Window. The outside of our facility was complete.

In October of 2015 – Pastor Tim Leitzke accepted another call. Pastor Gordon Simmons, Assistant to the Bishop, met with the TOL Council for several months to help guide TOL in its next steps and future plans. Pastor Michael Merkel became TOL's Interim Pastor in January of 2016.

At the January 2016 congregational meeting, TOL members discussed three possible options for TOL: continuing as we are now, returning to mission status, or even closing. The Middletown, Odessa, and Townsend area is still a fast-growing, prime area for a Lutheran Church. With Pastor Gordon Simmons' and Pastor Michael Merkel's guidance and leadership, TOL has put into motion several evangelism plans: There is a door-knocking campaign that has started and continues on a monthly basis, the Invite 500 challenge has begun – where members have been challenged to invite a total of 500 people to TOL in 2016, a 25th anniversary celebration party is scheduled for May 14, 2016, and Nicky Zaiser has reinstituted the TOL Quilting Circle with great success. Although there are still many obstacles for TOL, the atmosphere still feels like a family, but there is a renewed hope and joy within this family that they so much want to share with others.

## ***Epilogue:***

Tree of Life's current mission statement is *"To be faithful children of God, called by grace through Christ, and sharing this gift with Middletown, Odessa, Townsend and the World."* This is an ongoing mission. It cannot be 'accomplished' in the sense that we will ever feel we are done. Pray God that we will find a way to remain strong and carry out our mission.

Peggy Jahn's History follows:

### **OUR HISTORY AND NEW BEGINNINGS – 1991-2009**

On May 19, 1991, Jim and Mary Raun brought together their idea to form a new Lutheran church in the MOT area. There were 12 at that first meeting; just like the disciples. Present along with Jim and Mary were Rev. David Blackwelder, Theda Blackwelder, Rev. Greg Johnson, Mary Ellen Raun, Janet Parks, Donna Parks, Janet Ann Parks, Sylvia Schill, Dot Schreppler and Charles Schreppler. St. Anne's Episcopal Church graciously offered the use of their chapel, Barr Chapel, for us to meet. On August 27, 1991, we began worshipping on a monthly basis at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. We had a Pastor-of-the-Month type of rotation for conducting our services. Pastor Blackwelder served for many months and we had several seminarian students – Dick Mathisen, Greg Frey and Elsa Clarke – as well as Pastors Greg Johnson, Roger Burkins, Jack Little and Richard Batman, lead our services as we slowly grew and began worshipping weekly. Our original name was St. Mary's Lutheran Community Church. This name was chosen for several reasons – Mary is Jesus' mother; we were meeting in St. Anne's (Mary's mother) and, in a small way, to honor Mary Raun, who was instrumental in helping to start our church and who had passed away from cancer in 1992. We also included the word Community in our name because we were trying to reach out to the community—sharing God's word and love.

In 1993, a committee was appointed to devise a plan for developing us into an official ministry in the MOT area. Members of the committee consisted of Dr. Jarrett Hansen, Pastor Jane Shields, Pastor John Keating and Jim Raun.

We were growing out of the small chapel space at St. Anne's and in 1994 made the move to the storefront at 1 S. Broad Street, where we remained for the next 12 years. Throughout these years we had several changes -- sometimes moving forward, sometimes moving back; but through it all we had a commitment to God, to our community and to ourselves. Over these years Pastor Norman Minich served twice as an interim pastor. We called our first Pastor – Russell Scott – who was with us for a year. We changed our name to Tree of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church. We signed our Charter on April 18, 1999, and had a grand celebration on June 20th at St. Joseph's Hall. We called our second Pastor – Jennifer Carlson



– who was with us for three years. During all of this, we continued to grow as a congregation and as an integral part of the MOT community with many outreach programs developing. By 2006 we had outgrown our 1 S. Broad Street location for worship and made the move to worship at Brick Mill Elementary School, keeping the storefront as our ministry center. In 2007, we moved our ministry center to its current location at 211 N. Broad Street and Pastor Hamlin joined us as interim pastor.

On June 30, 2009, Tree of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church purchased a building and property at 505 Osbourne Street in Odessa. We are currently renovating the existing building with the goals of moving the Ministry Center in by September 1, 2009, and having our first worship service on October 3, 2009. A three year capital campaign is now in progress to raise funds for the renovations and for the addition of a new sanctuary onto the existing renovated building within the next few years.

Eighteen years ago we moved back to Delaware from our retirement in Maine. Reading a small ad in the local newspaper inviting people to meet at St. Anne's for a Lutheran service, we attended and were happy to become members of a new church. Growing slowly, we had several major moves. We learned from these experiences; what to expect and to have inner strength to take on a BIG new project – the purchase of land and a building. Much work has to be done in renovating, but we are doing so with great expectations to celebrate with services this Fall. We look forward to seeing our church furnishings back in place. Our chairs with cloth seats. Our altar and baptismal font – built by Don Nolte, and the other items that have been in storage that will remind us of the work done along the way and the people who carried us this far with so much love and joy. We all are looking forward to new beginnings and seeing parts of our past. With the love of Christ and His guidance, we will build a house of worship for all and reach out to our community . . . Middletown, Odessa, Townsend and the World. My one wish is that Jim and Mary Raun could be here to celebrate with us.

In His service,  
Peggy Jahn, Council

**Original Advertisement  
Placed in the Middletown  
Transcript**

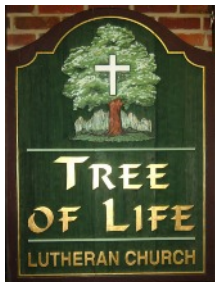
**ATTENTION: M.O.T. LUTHERANS**  
A Lutheran Worship Service, Fellowship Hour and  
Mission Planning Discussion

Will be held: on **SUNDAY MAY 19 at 2 pm**  
**St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Green St. Middletown DE.**

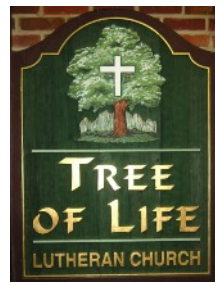
Sponsored by: Mission Task Force of the Delaware-  
Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran  
Church of America

Following Worship on May 19, there will be an open discussion regarding  
potential interest in forming a Lutheran Community in the Middletown area.

If Interested (BUT UNABLE TO ATTEND), please register your interest  
with Pastor Blackwelder 378-4035.



**This booklet is Dedicated to the  
Glory of God and the Memory of  
Marguerite (Peggy) Jahn**



**Lighted Cross and Stained Glass windows  
On the Left is the Schreppler Memorial Window.  
On the Right is the Jahn Memorial Window.**