

This is the continuing History of Tree of Life Lutheran Church.

It follows the twenty-five-year history, which was published in the summer of 2016.

This is Christ's Church, There's a Place for You Here.

Prologue

Towards the end of the Twenty-fifth Anniversary booklet for Tree of Life Lutheran Church, it was noted that 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. It's clear that we did not close. We also did not return to mission status. We are continuing. We endured throughout the COVID pestilence. And, as was also mentioned in the 25-year Anniversary booklet, although there are still many obstacles for TOL, the atmosphere still feels like a family, and there is a renewed hope and joy within this family that they so much want to share with others.

We enjoyed our 25th anniversary celebration party on May 14, 2016. The poor weather forecast did not deter Tree of Life from celebrating its 25th anniversary. There was food, raffle baskets, a 50/50 drawing, and a band (The Juveniles). We thank Bishop Herz-Lane for coming and speaking with us. A huge thanks to everyone who worked so hard to ensure the party was a success and all were able to enjoy themselves.

What follows is a catch-up of Tree of Life's History from the middle of 2016 to the middle of 2022. Some of the text is copied or slightly modified from our monthly newsletter, the Leaflet or from our annual reports. Much thanks to those who faithfully prepare those documents.

Part 1 – the concept of VISION

On June 12, 2016, 25 members of TOL, plus Pastors Merkel and Simmons (representing the bishop's office) met to discuss the concept of Vision. Most of our parishioners' comments were positive. They were hopeful and cheerful. They said that TOL felt like family, was friendly and welcoming. They were positive about our programs like the Grocery Club, the Quilting Circle, and our use of music. They felt our members were dedicated, loyal, caring, vibrant, and valued diversity. Several said we were imaginative in our ministries and outreach.

But some expressed concern that we were coasting along with the status quo. Many felt we had a good location, although some expressed concern about our visibility from the surrounding highways.

Among the impediments to achieving our vision was the lack of younger members, including families with children, insufficient income to afford a full-time pastor, and the lack of programs appealing to outsiders. Other possible impediments were the lack of sufficient parking space and not enough focus on modern, diverse worship services.

The participants split into several smaller groups to work on drafting vision statements.

Among the vision concepts were the idea of our being a welcoming, comfortable and happy congregation who prides ourselves as being part of a growing community which is family oriented. We envisioned that TOL should do more to acknowledge visitors, become more diverse in our worship service via music in order to attract younger people. We also wanted to maintain our membership by sending out bulletins, getting input from new members and maintaining contact with members who were away, sick, or shut in. WE also wanted a ministry that reflects and is sensitive to the needs of the larger community. This would require more evangelism and the right leadership.

We looked at three options for pastoral leadership:

1. A part-time pastor to lead us in a shared VISION with a plan to enhance our current location in support of the VISION;
2. A part-time intentional interim pastor (someone trained in interim work, for a term of 1 to 3 years) to lead us in a shared VISION with a plan to enhance our current location in support of the VISION; and
3. An interim pastor who can provide pastoral leadership for a specific period of time (1 to 3 years) to allow us to 'catch our breath' and provide time for healing and growth in membership to take place prior to making plans for future.

Our church council took these ideas under consideration and concluded that TOL should:

1. Begin a process of drafting a formal VISION Statement
2. Develop a description of the kind of pastoral leadership we need and want
3. Update a plan for discernment to identify goals through end of year
4. Clear out the brush and then get quotes on tree trimming and removal
5. Communicate our plans to the congregation

Part 2 - Action

In the years after our Anniversary celebration and the development of our Vision, with Pastors Gordon Simmons and Michael Merkel's guidance and leadership, TOL put into place several evangelism plans: There was a door-knocking campaign, and the Invite 500 challenge was begun. These plans met with moderate success. Pastor Merkel became our interim Pastor. We also put into place plans to make Tree of Life more physically visible via tree trimming or removal, created a Facebook page, and improved our signage.

Pastor Merkel extended his contract to the end of 2016 with Pastor Gordon Simmons filling in for him during Thanksgiving and Christmas vacation and Pastor Barbara Melosh, Dean of our Conference, filling in the one day neither Pastor Simmons nor Merkel were available.

In the coming years, Tree of Life experienced several up and downs.

For example, during September of 2016, we had to do away with our 8:30 AM service, due to low attendance. But in October, we cleaned up trees and made TOL more visible from Route 13 north. Our property was "cleaner, neater and easier to maintain". Pastor Merkel extended to June of 2017. (Thank you, Pastor Merkel for all you've done for us.)

An Automated External Defibrillator (AED) machine was purchased, thanks to a generous donation by Joanne Letwinch in memory of her mother. The first aid kit was moved and mounted close to the AED. Training was offered.

Several repairs were made. Motion detection lighting was installed in the parking lot. Some kitchen plumbing was fixed - including changing the faucets so the hot water faucet is now on the left and the cold on the right!

New blue and white reflective TOL directional signs were ordered and placed on Routes 13 North & South as well as on Rt. 299. The parking lot was repaved.

In October of 2017, the windows in the Fellowship and Sunday School rooms were replaced. We were able to contribute to several charities and community activities, including Adopt-a-highway, our quilting circle, a clothing drive which clothed 32 persons, a backpack supply collection drive, a 'noisy change' collection to help with world hunger, and Christmas in Odessa. Lighting for our stained-glass windows was repaired and made workable again.

But we determined in 2017 that our income was still insufficient to call a full-time permanent pastor. Nevertheless, we put together a Ministry Site Profile (MSP) to submit to the Synod to help us with our search for a full-time minister. In June of 2017, a call committee was formed, consisting of Pam Baker (Chair), Bruce Blair, Ed Bullock, Jerry Campbell, Mark Cilento, and Nicky Zaiser.

Sunday School attendance was down, so we revamped our children's program to have them meet on Wednesday evenings with Joanne Letwinch and Pam Nichols leading the groups.

Part 3 - 2018 and on. Many Activities

We said farewell to Pastor Merkel early in 2018, but were greeted again by Pastor Greg Johnson, who had been instrumental in our founding and came to be our supply Pastor and puppet master. (Yes!) Pastor Greg returned with his puppet friend JP and JP's other friends. What JP and his friends have to tell us is always a lesson given in coordination Pastor Johnson's sermons. Pastor Johnson invites any children who may be attending the service to join him and JP for the message. If there are no children present, murmurs of "Puppets – puppets" can be heard coming from the adults in the pews and JP presents his message to the grown-ups.

Pastor Johnson also began an adult class each Sunday at 9:30 AM. In the Spring of 2018, he taught something he titled "Stages to Becoming a Christian" then in the fall and spring he did a Great Courses video "Luther, Law and Gospel." The next year he did a Great Courses Video "Understanding the New Testament" that was interrupted by COVID.

In May of 2018, our web site was redesigned by Amanda Campbell and our former web master, Jeff Russel, retired. Thank you, Mandy and Jeff! Paul Schuler took over as Web Master. We continued to improve the appearance of our property by removing and trimming trees. The Collett family donated swings to TOL. This came in handy during Bible Camp in July. The swings were hung from a wooden framework donated by the Schills.

Our youth had been attending summer programs and our youth groups went through several name changes, including Troop 505. But in September of 2018, our youth group was renamed the Kingdom Kids under the direction of Pastor Johnson, Pam Nichols, and Joanne Letwinch.

The reports and newsletter published in 2018 highlight what an active congregation Tree of Life is. All of the activities mentioned so far continued and some were even expanded.

For example, as part of TOL's God's Work, Our Hands project, on October 20th, TOL hosted its Second Annual Clothing Giveaway—with a twist. We not only collected used clothing, but other household items as well: pots, pans, dishes, glasses, tools, Christmas items, jewelry, and silver ware.

We also managed to repair our Air Conditioning / Heating Units, purchase new chairs for the worship area, and to conduct a family-oriented communion training program for some of our youth which included acolyte training. This training was completed by Reformation Sunday of 2018.

Then, early in December of 2018, we presented our first Live Nativity presentation. The Christmas story was acted out and everyone was invited to participate in a sing-along.

Part 4 – 2019 – Pastoral leadership and more looking ahead

On February 1 of 2019 we hired Jim Guldner as our Lay Minister and in March, the call committee was disbanded, and Pastor Johnson was appointed as our pastor by the synodical bishop.

We created a long-range planning committee, with members Mark Cilento, Donna Parks, Gerrit Saleminck, Gene Zaiser, and Pastor Johnson.

This group documented those things that people need or expect when they come to TOL.

- 1) Worship — a meaningful worship service, liturgically set in a Lutheran tradition, Biblically based, not too staid and not too free form.
- 2) Education — Biblical teaching with a solid Christian theological base for adults and youth.

- 3) Fellowship — Christian friends who know each other and share faith in and outside the church.
- 4) Service Opportunities — to work together to express our Christian faith with sharing and serving.
- 5) Nurturing — an awareness of each other's needs and willingness to help and support one another.
- 6) Pastoral Care — a pastor to bring Word and Sacraments to bear with personal visits and church leadership in baptisms, first communion, weddings, funerals, hospital visits, etc.
- 7) Opportunities to practice our faith as individuals and groups.

Our Treasurer, Gene Zaiser, negotiated a change to our mortgage. We now had a new 5-year mortgage which enabled Tree of Life to pay off the mortgage in 5 years with no penalty. We also received a very generous donation in support of this plan.

Around June of 2019 we completed our visual Directory making it easier to put names and faces together. John Baker and George Matz took members' pictures and had them posted on a board constructed by Gene Zaiser so that we could enjoy name recognition.

Tree of Life was involved in many new or on-going activities, including hosting the University of Delaware's summer reading program and the Pill Bottle Ministry. The UD reading group had been meeting elsewhere but was unable to coordinate the meeting date. Pam Baker offered TOL as a meeting place for them and Jerry Campbell took on the responsibility for setting up and opening our building for the teachers and youth in the reading program. Donna Parks also collected prescription and over-the-counter drug bottles which were sent to the Matthew 25 Ministries who, in turn, sent them to poor countries where, when medical aid is available, pills are usually given to clients in tissues or other paper products.

In addition to our annual Adopt-A-Family initiative, we adopted four seniors from the MOT Senior Center. Mark Cilento graciously applied for and received a Thrivent Donation to support this fundraiser. For the second year in a row, our Kingdom Kids made "Snowman Packets" for the Stockings for Soldiers outreach. They put together 50 hot chocolate packets, included Hershey kisses, a candy cane for stirring and three marshmallows. Also included was a poem about what the packet was for and Christmas greetings from the Kingdom Kids.

TOL also purchased a quarter-page add to be included in the new 'My Middletown' publication.

Other 2019 achievements were the creation of an Evangelism Committee, the separation of the Altar Guild from Worship and Music, the purchase of a new shed, and the restriping of the parking lot. The Worship and Music committee, working with our choir director and organist, Duane Dillard, began creating a supplemental hymnal.

In spite of some concerns that TOL was becoming involved in too many fundraisers and outreach programs and were stretching ourselves too thin, TOL was showing the MOT area and beyond that we are here and willing to help.

Part 5 – We face Worldly Dangers

In December of 2019, Tim Lintz provided information on an Active Shooter Training Program and worked with us to develop an 'In Case of Emergency' Plan for our church.

In our January 2020 monthly LEAFLET, pastor Greg's 'From the pastor' article said, 'many horrible diseases are conquered' and 'the future is too unpredictable'. He also mentioned some of the problems the world was facing and how the great inequities of life push us into struggles.

Then, ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

As we moved into 2020, it became increasingly obvious that, in the middle of the pandemic, many activities would have to slow down. But we still managed to accomplish much. Most committee and other organization meeting were held via ZOOM.

Although we were able to place our new supplemental hymnals in the pews, we began to hold communion in our seats rather than at the rail. Because of the growing concern about the dangers of covid, four sanitizing stations were installed at TOL and the TOL Quilters made face masks. By April 15th, we decided to cancel services altogether.

But this did not last. We began a program of virtual services, thanks to Pastor Greg, Lynda Giambra, Sylvia Schill, Duane Dillard, Pam Nichols, Gail Russell, Jean Mullen and Gerrit Saleminck. Sermons, singing, and bible verse reading all took place in separate areas and at different time and were put together as a YOUTUBE video, then e-mailed to the congregation and placed onto the web site.

Bible Camp had to be cancelled, but other meetings took place virtually, mostly via ZOOM. Then we hosted an outdoor service in July. Services were held outdoors, weather permitting and also recorded. We began to share the peace with smiles and hand waves, but not touching. We were determined not to allow the pandemic to deter us from our worship of God.

In September of 2020, we were still worshipping outdoors when weather permitted, but we also streamed the service indoors because there was too much traffic noise turning up on the outdoor video.

Despite these logistic problems, our Community Garden, thanks to a Thrivent grant and a TOL contribution, was up and growing. Raised beds were built by John and Shaun Baker and various vegetables were planted. A faucet installed outside the pump house by Hanno Schill allowed the Confirmands to take over the watering, weeding, and harvesting of the vegetables which included a variety of vegetables. Pastor created a rotational schedule between the confirmands and their families who will maintain the garden. We were off to an amazing start and were blessed with a bountiful harvest which was donated to food pantries and the TOL Grocery Club for distribution.

By October though, courtesy of tropical storm Isaias, several trees had to be removed and we now have a clear view of route 13 (and drivers and passengers on route 13 have a clear view of us!).

During November, we began to investigate what "limitations", if any, we would have to accept and follow if we were to return to indoor worship.

By the end of the year, we had decided to hire an Office Manager. Jean Mullen had been volunteering as Office Manager and we thanked her for her service. We hired Lydia Chemji and Jean was willing to train her.

Although we had to cancel our Live Nativity which we had been presenting, our Kingdom Kids did a drive by Christmas for nine people or families who were alone, ill, or elderly. They came in decorated automobiles, dropped off cookies, rolled down their car windows, and wished everyone a merry Christmas.

But in spite of any problems we encountered, our 2020 income was over our budget through the constant generosity of our parishioners.

Part 6 – We are active throughout the pandemic

Although the peak of the Covid pandemic was generally considered to be in early 2021, a perusal of our monthly newsletter, the Leaflet, shows several TOL activities, many of our youth and guest youth.

It is true that the annual congregational meeting, usually held in January, was postponed until April 18th of 2021 due to covid concerns.

Our Easter service was held outdoors in our parking lot (outdoor services had previously been held in a side lot of TOL.) This was the first outdoor service for TOL for 2021.

We need to remember Rick Mullen, who passed away on April 15th, 2021. When TOL took ownership of our current church home, Rick was one of the team who worked tirelessly in rehabbing the building, painting many coats of paint, painting kitchen cabinets and, with great patience, stripping paint off the kitchen cabinet hardware. Rick was also an

integral part of the Grocery Club and an extra set of hands in helping Jean with things in the office. Rick was quiet, but very thoughtful and willing to help in many ways. We will miss our brother in Christ but know that this is not good-bye but see you later.

Our Kingdom Kids continued to meet through the pandemic on ZOOM on Wednesdays from 6 to 7 pm, from March 2020 to September 2021, when they resumed in-person. They discovered new resources for their lessons, including Bible story videos, music, crossword puzzles, and other Bible games and quizzes. Despite being on ZOOM for school, the Kingdom Kids attendance was excellent. And all of the kids worked together (most of the time!), with the older kids going into Breakout Rooms with Pastor Greg or Jim Guldner from time to time.

In May of 2021, the Kingdom Kids sponsored a dedication of a brass sundial engraved to honor Joanne Letwinch who sadly passed away on January 18, 2021. The sundial was purchased by Michelle Brill with donations from the Kingdom Kids (which includes our two pastors). It was anchored in a cement block by the Collett family and was placed in the Butterfly Garden of the Delaware Aerospace Education Foundation headquartered in Smyrna. There is a large patio in the shape of a butterfly and the sundial is set between the butterfly's antennae.

On June 6th, following CDC and Delaware State guidelines, we returned to indoor services (with precautions.) The church building was sanitized on a weekly basis by John Baker, Jerry Campbell and subsequently Buddy Lindquist. Also, prior to June 6th, the interior of our church home was professionally cleaned. Social distancing was encouraged. The seating was rearranged to facilitate social distancing and masks were made a requirement. We sanitized and used prefilled communion cups for the wine and bread.

Although we were unable to host a vacation bible camp in 2021, on Wednesday, June 23rd, the Kingdom Kids enjoying a Summer Fun Day at the Zaiser's. JP and his friends were there, and all enjoyed the story of Noah, crafts, music, games, swimming, ice cream and much more. Many members helped with this effort.

Then in August, activities were beginning to pick back up. We communed at the altar on August 15 for the first time since March of 2020. We had been communing in our seats for 74 weeks.

Our original Tree of Life sign was destroyed during an auto accident and replaced with a new Tree of Life sign which was later installed, and Pastor's name was added. A brass plate was also added, with Joanne Letwinch's name, to whom our sign is dedicated.

Then the Worship and Music Committee determined that the cost of real flowers was too high, so we started to focus on artificial flowers.

We had to put up Private Property and No Trespassing signs because concerned neighbors reported via voicemail to Pastor, and members witnessed persons camping out on our parking facilities. A request was made to the State police for patrols. This topic was discussed in full and although no one really likes seeing those types of signs on our premises, the need was realized as suggested by the State Police to legally ask people to move. A compromising decision was made to cover the signs during our Sunday Service when members and visitors are coming but permit them to be uncovered at all other times.

Sadly, our friend, Pastor Jack Little, passed away on July 20, 2021. Jack was a Lutheran pastor and served in many areas. In recent years he served as a supply pastor at Tree of Life and other churches. He often lent his wonderful singing voice to our choir and joined the OWLS on many of their excursions and luncheons. Jack loved to travel and enjoyed life fully. He will be deeply missed by his Tree of Life family.

Then on, October 21, 2021, Tree of Life's friend and fellow OWL, Arnold Toller, left us for the arms of our Lord. Arnold was 93 years old and a kind man that who enjoyed life and lived life fully. He was very proud of his service in the Navy as well as building a successful business. He was full of many stories that he loved to share; loved his dogs (actually all dogs) and especially loved his companion, Dallas Dean. Arnold, we thank you for your service to our country, your stories and your friendship. We will miss you and extend our sincere sympathies to Dallas, his grandson, Brian, and Arnold's children, extended family and friends.

Part 7 – recovery

Toward the end of 2021 and into 2022, Tree of Life began to return to indoor services being held as ‘normal’ as possible.

We still record our services and send our bulletins, Bible readings, and newsletters out to the congregation and place them on our web site. We kneel by the altar railing for communion, but pass the peace by waving, smiling, and acknowledging one another’s presence. We returned to collecting the offering by passing an offering plate. Wearing masks is optional. And occasionally, our choir is singing!

In 2021 three communion trays and covers were replaced and the chalice was refinished. In December of 2021 we were able to again present a Live Nativity, despite some illness. Members of TOL did stand-in duty for the nativity! Despite the covid crisis, Tree of Life was able to do a salary increase for our staff members.

In 2022, our choir director and organist, Duan Dillard, wrote new music for our liturgy including gospel acclamation, the Holy, Holy, Holy and the Lamb of God.

We decided to have a fundraiser for Ukraine and purchased real flowers for our Easter, 2022 service courtesy of the Worship & Music Committee via a Thrivent Grant (thank you, John Baker). After worship the flowers were made available to the congregation for a free will offering. Council matched whatever was raised up to \$1,000. Lutheran World Relief matched funds 100% and a total of \$1,513 was raised in the free-will offering. With Council’s match \$2,513 was sent to Lutheran World Relief and, with their match, our Thrivent grant of \$250 turned into a whopping donation of \$5,026 to help those in need in the Ukraine. A huge Thank You to all who helped this cause.

Oasis of Love was presented with a Facilities Lease Agreement necessary according to our insurance company and, unfortunately, Oasis of Love decided they did not want to continue using our church. At the end of April, they no longer had access to our facilities.

Epilogue

The congregation of Tree of Life wants to thank the ‘dustbusters’ for their continuing effort to keep our church building clean. Thank you to anyone who made an extra effort to sanitize the building during the Covid crisis (and continue to ensure the cleanliness of our place of worship.)

It has become clear that our Synod would like us to have a full-time pastor, but we are not sure we can afford one at present.

We want to thank Dallas Dean and the late Arnold Toller for a generous gift. They paid off our mortgage! We held a picnic and a mortgage burning on June 26th of 2022!

Through good times and bad times, Tree of Life has persisted. It is a small, but very active congregation. As mentioned before, our mission, *“To be faithful children of God, called by grace through Christ, and sharing this gift with Middletown, Odessa, Townsend and the World”* is an ongoing mission. We will continue on; through good times and any bad times we may have. We need to continue to listen to God’s message and His lessons. We’ve survived the pandemic and Pastor Johnson has pointed out that one of the questions we should ask concerning this pandemic is, *“What is God teaching us?”*

Memorials

Tree of Life has been presented with several memorial gifts over the years. What follows is a partial list:

- The Fred Jahn memorial Stained-Glass window. Renamed the Peggy and Fred Jahn Memorial window after Peggy passed away in October of 2015. Funded by Peggy Jahn.
- The Charles Schreppler Memorial window. Funded by Dottie Schreppler.
- The brass sundial memorial honoring Joanne Letwinch. Purchased by Michelle Brill with donations from the Kingdom Kids (which includes our two pastors).
- The Tree of Life sign, dedicated to Joanne Letwinch.
- The Pascal Candle was donated by the OWLS in 2012.
- An Automated External Defibrillator (AED) machine was purchased, thanks to a generous donation by Joanne Letwinch in memory of her mother. The first aid kit was moved and mounted close to the AED. Training was offered.

Owls

The Older, Wiser Lutheran Seniors (OWLS) (the Senior Group at Tree of Life) has been mentioned several times in this history. It was suggested by Jim Raun that a senior group should be formed for TOL when it was still St. Mary's Church. Post card invitations were sent to members. The first meeting was held on August 3, 2005, at 8:30 a.m. at the Middletown Family Restaurant. Jim Raun originally suggested the name Older Wiser Lutherans. It was unanimously voted on and OWLS it is. A Holiday lunch was planned for December 14, 2006 and was also held at the Middletown Family Restaurant. There have been well over 100 outings including museums, dinners, theaters, cruises, the zoo, wineries and many, many luncheons. The attendance has been between 10 and 29 members.