

Celebrating God's Grace
in the Past...



...Building on God's Grace
for the Future

A History of Cross of Christ
Evangelical Lutheran Church

Liverpool, New York

1975-2015

By Pr. Jeremiah J. Gumm

(2015-2025 added by Pr. Benjamin J. Birner)

+ A Story of God's Grace +



**Celebrating the Past
Building for the Future**

The story of Cross of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Liverpool, NY is a story of God's amazing grace carried out in his own time. These past forty years have been filled with exciting highs and depressing lows. We have experienced the excitement of the congregation's founding and the mission work that followed, including the daughtering of two other mission congregations. We have experienced the sadness of saying goodbye to pastors and fellow believers and enduring a decade of pastoral vacancy. We have also had our joy renewed when the mission was re-started and now as we celebrate the dedication of our expanded and renovated facility. All along it has been a story of God's grace poured out in his own time – and it always will be.

+ 1975-1979 - Planting the Mission +

Cross of Christ's story began in the late 1960s when the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) began to receive inquiries from WELS and non-WELS families in the Syracuse area, particularly near the suburb of Liverpool, NY. WELS people were moving to the East Coast where there were only a small handful of WELS congregations scattered from Maine to Florida. Other Lutheran families were looking for a conservative Lutheran congregation unlike many in the area. So in 1970, Prs. Norm Berg and Dan Gieschen of the WELS General Board for Home Missions visited the area and met in the home of Don and Evelyn Barg to discuss the possibility of planning a mission in the Syracuse area.

Unfortunately, by the time of the meeting, two of the three interested families were already planning to transfer out of the area. Planting a mission here was shelved until God's timing was right. In August 1973, Pr. Erich Waldek of King of Kings Lutheran Church in Schenectady, NY and Pr. Paul Kelm of Faith Lutheran Church in Pittsfield, MA were asked to begin exploratory work in the Syracuse area. There was hope that the construction of two breweries in the area – Schlitz and Miller – would bring people from Wisconsin.

Due to distance, Pr. Waldek eventually took over the work. Canvassing was done. Names and information were gathered building up to an advertised

informational meeting that was held on 15 December 1974 at the home of Ken and Charlotte Becker on Mariner Trail in Baldwinsville. Among the WELS families attending were the Hahms and Breilands from Rochester, the Bargs from Liverpool, and the Kaplins from Utica. Several Missouri Synod (LC-MS) families also attended. Plans were made to offer services every other week starting in the Becker home. On 26 January 1975, the "Syracuse Mission" began meeting twice a month on Sunday afternoons at the Holiday Inn on Buckley Road. Before long, Pr. Waldek began flying from Albany to Syracuse every Sunday afternoon.

After a year of exploratory work, the Syracuse mission was granted "Mission Status" by the WELS General Board for Home Missions on 15 November 1975. This allowed the Syracuse Mission to call a resident pastor and establish the mission. Four Divine Calls were issued to experienced pastors, but all were returned. So a graduate candidate was requested and assigned from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The Syracuse Mission's first resident pastor - Kenneth Kappel (*Pictured*) - was ordained and installed on 11 July 1976 at the Holiday Inn on Buckley Road.



Mission work picked up in the months that followed. On 22 August, the name "Cross of Christ" beat out "Abiding Word" and "Sacred Word" as the new name for the fledgling congregation. On 12 September, a charter was adopted. In Spring 1977, a struggling mission group of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in Cazenovia disbanded and joined efforts with Cross of Christ.

The Lord continued to bless our initial mission efforts with new faces and new opportunities, raising the need for a permanent location. In May 1977, Cross of Christ was given the authority to begin the land search for a permanent location.

Cross of Christ's worship services moved from the Holiday Inn to the Penn Can Mall Community Room (*Pictured*) in June 1977. That



same month Cross of Christ was incorporated as a congregation.

The Ladies' Guild was officially organized in March 1978. Locations for a permanent facility were narrowed down to three – one on Electronics Parkway, one on the corner of Soule Road and Rte. 57, and one farther up Soule Road. In late 1978/early 1979, three acres of land were purchased on Soule and 57 for about \$45,000. In December 1978, the parsonage at 4276 Gemini Path was purchased for a similar price. Plans could now begin for the design and building of a permanent home for Cross of Christ.

In the meantime, the Lord continued to bless our mission work. In February 1979, Cross of Christ's services moved to the Metropolitan Water Board Building on Rte. 31 in Clay. Cross of Christ's first Vacation Bible School took place that summer with 11 kids attending. Even though the number of children attending that first VBS was small, VBS and other youth outreach programs have been an important part of Cross of Christ's outreach to our community ever since.

About this time, the Lord expanded Cross of Christ's mission efforts to the Rochester area with midweek Lenten services at the Hamilton Nursing Home in Rochester that began 7 March 1979. In May, the WELS Board for Home Missions authorized exploratory work in the Rochester area and worship services began in the Greece YMCA with Pr. Kappel traveling over to Rochester each week. In Summer 1980, Candidate Mark Gieschen was installed as the first resident pastor of what eventually became Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Fairport, NY – Cross of Christ's first "daughter."

Heading into the fall of 1979, an architect and general contractor were chosen for the building of Cross of Christ's first permanent facility – a Worship-Education-Fellowship facility or WEF. In all these things, the Lord was pouring out his grace on his people in his own time.





Church Picnic @ the Parsonage - July 1979

+ 1980-1984 - A Home for God's People +

A new decade ushered in an exciting time for Cross of Christ. In the fall of 1979, Bennetts/Turner/Couch Associated Architects was chosen for the task of designing Cross of Christ's first permanent facility—a Worship-Education-Fellowship facility or WEF. Stewart Hill was hired as the general contractor. At this time in our denomination's history, the WELS Board for Home Missions took a very active role in specifying how a mission congregation like ours should design and build their facility. At times, this proved to be a challenge with the building process particularly with the specific size and design of the facility.

Warren Kompe, Vernon Kompe, and Brian Sabean all served at different times as Building Committee chairmen, and Bert Toensing served on the committee. On 6 January 1980, the architects presented the plans to the congregation. Planning and preparation continued until 17 August 1980 when the groundbreaking ceremony for the WEF facility was conducted. Unfortunately, for various reasons, construction would not start until December.

The Lord blessed the construction with progress to the point that the congregation was able to stop renting meeting space in the Metropolitan Water Board building. The first worship service in the new facility took place on Easter

Sunday, 19 April 1981. After six years of mission work, Cross of Christ formally dedicated their WEF facility on Sunday, 3 May 1981 with two worship services and a fellowship dinner attended by members of Cross of Christ and friends from neighboring WELS congregations and the community.

The Lord continued to bless Cross of Christ with souls and opportunities. In October 1983, Dick and Maruta Bassett were the first couple married in the new facility. That same month, Cross of Christ also joined the new North Atlantic District (WELS), with congregations from Ottawa, ON to Charlotte, NC, as a member of the new Seaway Circuit and the Colonial North Conference.



On 26 February 1984, the congregation bid farewell to Pr. Ken Kappel, their first resident pastor who had accepted a Divine Call to Milwaukee, WI. Pr. Erich Waldek of King of Kings in Clifton Park, NY served the vacancy, which lasted until July. Candidate Robert Duehlmeyer Jr. was assigned from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and was ordained and installed on 29 July 1984 as Cross of Christ's second pastor. In all these things, the Lord was pouring out his grace on his people in his own time.



WEF Construction – January 1981



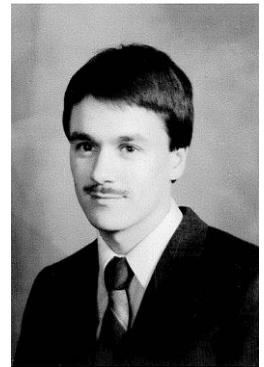
L to R: Brian Sabean & Pr. Kappel

+ 1985-1989 - Growing Up +

Entering her second decade, Cross of Christ had settled nicely into their Worship-Education-Fellowship facility. Robert Duehlmeyer Jr. was serving as Cross of Christ's second resident pastor having arrived in 1984, yet it was also a time of transition from the mission planting days of the decade before.

The Lord blessed our congregation with growing numbers and steady attendance in spite of a great deal of transience with members transferring in and out of the area due for work reasons. The Lord also continued to richly bless our youth activities offered every year.

On 31 May 1987, the congregation bid farewell to Pr. Duehlmeyer, who had accepted a Divine Call to Sodus, MI. Pr. Erich Waldek of King of Kings in Clifton Park, NY once again served the vacancy. Candidate Jon Bitter was assigned from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and was ordained and installed on 12 July 1987 as Cross of Christ's third pastor.



In Spring 1988, Cross of Christ hosted the Michigan Lutheran Seminary traveling choir. The next time we would do so would be Spring 2014. Great effort continued to be poured into reaching out to our community with the Gospel. The Lord continued to bless Cross of Christ with growth as the congregation reached its largest size until the late 2000s. In all these things, the Lord was pouring out his grace on his people in his own time.



Vacation Bible School - 1986



*L: Bible
Costume Party
October 1989*

*R: Christmas
1985*



+ 1990-1995 – A Perfect Storm +

As Cross of Christ reached her fifteenth year of grace and entered a new decade, the Lord was richly blessing his little flock in Liverpool as he had in the past. Jon Bitter was serving as Cross of Christ's third resident pastor having arrived with his family in 1987. Extensive outreach work through surveying and canvassing in the neighborhoods around the church, including Casual Estates, brought new members and families—a number of whom are still active today. The Lord even blessed a number of our young families with a baby boomlet of little ones. Nevertheless, a perfect storm was forming on the horizon that would eventually leave Cross of Christ without a resident pastor for a decade.

Due to the transient nature of business in Central New York, the congregation had never been able to gain enough traction to become a self-supporting congregation. Even fifteen years after its start, Cross of Christ was still receiving annual financial subsidy from WELS.

At the same time, Central New York was undergoing a long, economic recession that resulted in major downsizing at many of the heavy industry plants in the area. The unemployment that followed led many to move out of the area. This, of course, had a negative impact on Cross of Christ's membership.

By 1994, in spite of the congregation's best outreach efforts, membership was declining as individuals and families moved to other areas in search of jobs. To make matters worse, WELS was having its own financial troubles making it more difficult to provide subsidy for struggling mission congregations like Cross of

Christ. It soon became clear to our leadership that even with subsidy, the congregation was not going to be able to support a full-time pastor for long. In fact, there was a real possibility that funds would run out by Fall 1995.

After consultation with the WELS Board for Home Missions and North Atlantic District leadership, it was decided that the wisest plan was to place Pastor Bitter's name on Call lists to perhaps serve another congregation in the synod. In the meantime, discussions began for Cross of Christ to consider alternate forms of ministry and to prepare for what could be a long vacancy.

On 23 April 1995, the First Sunday after Easter, the congregation bid farewell to Pr. Bitter and his family, after he accepted a Divine Call to Zion, IL. Pr. Erich Waldek of King of Kings in Clifton Park, NY once again was called to serve the vacancy at Cross of Christ.

With Pr. Bitter's departure, Cross of Christ entered a time period known by those who remember it as "The Vacancy." It would prove to be one of the most challenging periods in the congregation's history. The Lord in his wisdom would make Cross of Christ wait ten years before another full-time, resident pastor would serve in their midst. Yet even in difficulty, the Lord was pouring out his grace on his people in his own time.



Cross of Christ Choir – 1994/95



Dan, Kara, & Andrew Sleeth



Steve, Sue, & Sean Cooley



L: Kathy & Holly Armstrong

R: The Higuchi Family

Below: The Bitter Family





Beaver Lake Chili Fest – September 1994

+ 1995-2005 – The Vacancy +

When Cross of Christ reached its 20th anniversary in late 1995, there seemed to be little reason for celebration. A financial “perfect storm” had put the congregation in a position where their resident pastor had to accept a Call to another congregation. That happened in April 1995 when Pr. Jon Bitter accepted a Call to a WELS congregation in Illinois.

With Pr. Bitter’s departure and WELS operating subsidy no longer available, Cross of Christ found itself without a pastor and without the resources to call and support a full-time pastor. Little did they realize, but they would have to wait ten years before they could call and support a full-time pastor again.

In spite of financial difficulties, loss of membership (as low as 25-30 souls in 2000!), loss of a resident pastor, and a decline in attendance, the remaining group leaned on God’s promises and refused to give up. With help from the North Atlantic District leadership and advising from the North Atlantic District Mission Board, Cross of Christ pursued alternative forms of ministry.

Retired pastors received a “Social Security Call” to serve Cross of Christ for months at a time. The Lord provided a number of faithful, experienced shepherds during “The Vacancy.”



The retired pastor who served the longest and most during “The Vacancy” was also Cross of Christ’s founding pastor—Pr. Em. Erich Waldek (*pictured with wife Jean*). Pr. Em. Joseph Petersen, Pr. Em. Tom Kraus, Pr. Em. Paul Wilde, and Pr. Em. Richard Lauersdorf also served as did other visiting WELS/ELS pastors. Pr. Richard Schleicher, with

Vicars Joel Sauer, Dave Koehler, and Harland Goetzinger came over from King of Kings in Clifton Park, NY, and Pr. Tom Pfothenhauer from St. Paul, Ottawa, ON also assisted. Occasionally taped services were also utilized.

Throughout this time period, attempts to renew operating subsidy through the WELS Board for Home Missions were made and were declined. Occasional offers on the property were also fielded—including one from a gas station that offered to allow the congregation to still have a facility in the back. Thankfully, that proposal never really gained traction.

Not all that took place during this time was struggle and survival. Besides weekly worship and Bible study, God’s people continued to have Ladies’ Guild, Sunday School, annual Vacation Bible Schools and even a Christmas for Kids. Christian education was a top priority for young and old alike, while the Lord also continued to bring in souls especially during time periods when pastors were able to coordinate follow-up.

In early 2001, an anonymous WELS donor made it possible for Cross of Christ to support a resident pastor for one year. Pr. Delmar Kannenberg (*pictured with wife Barb*), who had served as a missionary to Cameroon, was nearing retirement and soon accepted the Call.



Having “boots on the ground” for an entire year provided a wealth of information on the recovering Liverpool/Syracuse mission field and enabled Cross of Christ to renew its evangelism efforts. In 2002, Eckard Drug made a \$1.5 million offer on the church property—a possibility that stirred up hope of being able to call a full-time pastor again. However, after much effort, the Town of Clay would not re-zone the property and the deal fell

through. Church President Bert Toensing pointed out to the congregation that it seemed that God was making it pretty clear that He wanted the congregation to stay for the time being.

After Kannenberg's Call concluded in 2002, Cross of Christ went back to its previous vacant situation and the future was still uncertain. However, a new "perfect storm" was forming that the Lord would use to bless Cross of Christ.

Because of significant financial shortages, WELS was not able to start any new mission congregations. At the same time, sizable classes were graduating from the Seminary and concerns were growing that not all graduates would be able to be assigned to congregations throughout the synod. This became especially clear for the Seminary class of 2005 – a particularly large class.

Since missions were not being started, the WELS Board for Home Missions encouraged the local District Mission Boards to look for ways to restart or daughter mission congregations. Following up on Pr. Kannenberg's insights, the North Atlantic District Mission Board met with Cross of Christ's leaders in the fall of 2004. Misunderstandings and hard feelings from the past were set aside and a plan was begun to "restart the mission."

With God's help, Cross of Christ's request for new operating subsidy was granted in April 2005 with the hope that a graduate would be assigned to "restart the mission" in Liverpool. As he had in the past, the Lord was pouring out his grace on his people in his own time.



*Dzidra Terpstra & Rhea Harter
@ VBS 1999*



Vacation Bible School 1997

+ 2005-2010 – A Mission Reborn +

When Pr. Jon Bitter bid farewell to the Cross of Christ family in April 1995, no one expected the vacancy to last a decade, but that was the Lord's plan. Without a full-time, resident pastor, Cross of Christ faced a variety of challenges during "The Vacancy." Nevertheless the Lord blessed his people with perseverance while guiding events to finally make it possible for Cross of Christ to call a full-time resident pastor once again.



Working together with the North Atlantic District Mission Board, Cross of Christ's request for new operating subsidy was granted in April 2005 with the hope that a graduate would be assigned to "restart the mission" in Liverpool. A month later, the Lord answered that prayer with the assignment of Candidate Jeremiah Gumm, who was ordained and installed on 24 July 2005 (*pictured*) as Cross of Christ's fourth resident pastor. In the Lord's own time, "The Vacancy" was finally over.

There was much hope and excitement in the early days of the re-start, but the Lord made it clear quite quickly that "restarting the mission" would not be easy. From a significant need to fix a misunderstanding with the initial operating subsidy plan to the unique challenge of serving a congregation that was restarted as a new mission, yet had 30 years of history to the congregation getting used to working with a full-time pastor after ten years of vacancy, these early years of the re-start were not without challenge or heartburn.

However, as he had in the past, the Lord was pouring out his grace in ways no one had imagined. By God's grace, worship, Bible study, and Sunday School attendance increased more consistently. After a congregation-wide study of God's gift of Holy Communion in early 2006, the decision was made to offer the Lord's Supper twice a month instead of just once a month. The subsidy misunderstanding led to a stronger partnership with the WELS Board for Home Missions and North Atlantic District Mission Board that continues to this day.

The unique challenges of being both a re-started mission and an established congregation provided a mission-minded perspective that went beyond the Liverpool area. Cross of Christ's leaders supported Pastor Gumm's plan to travel 70+ miles to the Watertown/Fort Drum area to minister to a small group of civilian and military families in that region.

On 25 April 2006, the "Up North Ministry of Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church" was born around the dining room table of Walt and Melissa Koepp with the Blank and Cotter families participating. Eventually the name was shortened to Cross of Christ-North and monthly Bible studies around dining room tables became monthly gatherings in community centers or on-post chapels and eventually bi-monthly services in rented space at The Ramada in Watertown.

Cross of Christ's physical plant changed as well. In September 2006, the once brown church was painted white with dark brown trim. In September 2007, the church parking lot was paved for the first time (*pictured*). Overgrown trees and bushes were cleared or trimmed back and visibility was greatly improved.



Cross of Christ's evangelism efforts were expanded and refocused with a strong emphasis on youth and family ministry building on the congregation's solid track record of Christian education. Efforts were made to improve and strengthen Cross of Christ's identity in the community. The Lord brought new faces into the congregation with small, but steady growth.

Besides VBS and other events, Cross of Christ held regular Christmas and Easter for Kids events and even offered Little Treasures Playgroup for several years. As the Lord blessed these efforts, he also provided a growing number of little ones.

To reach out even more to the community, Cross of Christ began making use of mission teams from WELS Kingdom Workers and the WELS ministerial education schools to assist with canvassing or Vacation Bible School. In Summer 2010, Seminarian Peter Metzger served as a Summer Student Assistant doing outreach work in Liverpool and Watertown.

In November 2010, Cross of Christ celebrated their 35th anniversary with founding pastor, Pr. Em. Erich Waldek, preaching. Ken Becker, whose family hosted the first worship service, was in attendance. New communion ware was dedicated to God's glory in celebration of the anniversary.

Looking back on 35 years of grace and especially God's grace in the five years since the mission was re-started, it was becoming more and more clear that the congregation would need to expand their facility if they were going to become a self-supporting congregation. In fact, the Board for Home Missions renewed Cross of Christ's subsidy at that time with that need in mind.

The Lord had restarted the mission, but a new chapter was about to begin that would result in Cross of Christ building for the future. As he had in the past, the Lord was pouring out his grace on his people in his own time.



*Cross of Christ's first
Travel-Canvass-Witness Team
Spring 2006 (L to R: MLC Students – Stephanie
Sellnow, Dan Waldschmidt,
Mark Weinkauf, Hannah Gumm)*

*Right: Noah's Ark for Kids @ Ft. Drum
- 2008*



*Cross of Christ's 35th Anniversary Celebration –
November 2010 (Around Table L to R: Rev. Em.
Erich & Jean Waldek, Joy Higuchi, Ken Becker &
daughter Kathy Bartz, Dick & Maruta Bassett,
and Evelyn Barg)*



+ 2010-2015 – Building for the Future +

As Cross of Christ passed her 35th anniversary in late 2010, there were many reasons to be excited about the congregation's future. The Lord in his grace was continuing to provide small, but steady growth. The congregation continued to build a solid reputation among her neighbors for excellent youth events. Cross of Christ began establishing a social media presence on Facebook and started posting weekly sermon videos online. Even facility-wise, there had been some positive changes as a new baptismal font and altar candles were dedicated and a new furnace was installed, which also brought air conditioning for the first time.

Yet the Lord had an even greater reason for excitement. In August 2010 and April 2011, Pr. Mark Birkholz – the North Atlantic District Mission Counselor – met with the leaders and members of Cross of Christ to discuss the possibility of building a larger facility or expanding the WEF. In June, a facility study committee was formed. Research and conceptual planning began in earnest including the interview of several different architects.

On 16 October 2011, Harmony Architectural Associates was chosen to design “a clearly defined and liturgically-themed worship center/sanctuary that has some flexibility for other uses with the WEF being converted into multi-purpose ministry/activity space.” A capital campaign conducted by the elders began at the same time. The Lord blessed their work not only with generous gifts from Cross of Christ members, but even from friends of the congregation, as well as several WELS elementary schools and congregations.

In the meantime, the Lord continued to richly bless the mission and ministry work of the congregation. Vacation Bible School in the summer consistently grew in attendance from year to year. Christmas for Kids and Easter for Kids bore fruit as new families began attending and soon joined the congregation. In Watertown, the Lord continued to bless the work of Cross of Christ-North as worship attendance increased and new families and individuals expressed interest. Cross of Christ's first Bible Information Class taught by Skype took place during this time with a military family at Fort Drum. God's people in Watertown began making plans for a future as their own congregation.

By early 2013, the Cross of Christ family had put in much preparation work with plans to submit their financing request to CEF in May. However, the Lord had other plans. Due to a misunderstanding between the congregation and CEF, it was discovered that Cross of Christ's request was significantly short of the needed amount for the building project to be financed. Attempts were made to close the gap via grant requests and other giving, but in the end, the gap was too large and the project was significantly delayed. Yet even in that time of frustration, the Lord was preparing to pour out grace on his people his own time.

At the end of 2013, Cross of Christ's Council and Building Committee formulated a plan to downsize the design and go forward with the building until the Lord made it clear that we should go no further. What no one realized is that not only would the Lord open the door for the project, but he would also open the floodgates of his grace on his people in unexpected ways.

While revised designs were being made for the building, the Lord began to bring even more new families and individuals into our congregation. Worship attendance leaped by over 20 people per Sunday. The Lord blessed the Vacation Bible School with 50 children – the largest attendance in Cross of Christ's history. The Lord was making it very clear that it was time to expand and renovate the original facility, but his hand of blessing did not just open over Liverpool.

In April 2014, the Lord led the WELS Board for Home Missions to approve subsidy for Cross of Christ-North, which enabled them to finally call a resident pastor. Candidate Harland Goetzinger III was assigned to plant the Watertown mission and was installed on 27 July 2015 with great thanksgiving. After 8 ½ years of mission work, Cross of Christ had a second "daughter," which soon became known as Redemption Evangelical Lutheran Church in Watertown, NY.

Cross of Christ's building process sped up significantly in the months that followed. WELS Builders for Christ (BFC) expressed willingness to take on Cross of Christ's project, even in spite of some challenges with the Town of Clay. Then to top off an amazing year of God's grace, on 17 December 2014, the Lord led the WELS Church Extension Fund to approve our financing request with the full backing of the WELS Board for Home Missions. In his own time, the Lord finally enabled our congregation to expand and renovate our facility!

In January 2015, Mike Clark began serving as building chairman eventually

taking on the task of general contractor for the project in conjunction with BFC project managers Martin Leyrer and Paul Lebrun. Sub-committees were formed and began their work in earnest. On Easter Sunday, 5 April, a groundbreaking ceremony kicked off the construction portion of the project with great joy.

Before long, a concrete slab marked out the location of Cross of Christ's new sanctuary. In early June, the first BFC volunteers arrived and began their work. In spite of delays caused by weather and truss issues, the Lord richly blessed the building project and those who worked on it with safety, progress, and joy. On 26 July, the congregation concluded worship in the original sanctuary after 34 years of grace with a special service. The first service in the new, unfinished sanctuary took place on 2 August. The Builders and Cross of Christ members and friends worked willingly and tirelessly to complete the project.

As he had throughout the process and for the 40 years prior, the Lord richly blessed the work of his people and poured out his grace on them in his own time. By his grace, on Sunday, 22 November 2015, the Cross of Christ family dedicated the new facility to God's glory and celebrated 40 years of boundless grace.



*Left: Vacation Bible School 2014
Below: Installation of Pr. Goetzing @
Watertown, NY - 27 July 2014*



Left: Ladies' Night Out - 2011

Below: "Topping off" the new sanctuary with the cross



L: Quadruple Baptism! – 2014

R: Groundbreaking – Easter 2015

Below: BFC prepping to put up the cupola



+ 2015-2019 – God’s Grace Continues +

Cross of Christ settled into their new sanctuary, and God graciously continued to provide them with steady membership. In 2016, the Lord blessed their various outreach events with 32 children at their VBS (despite a 2-year hiatus), 168 people at Trunk or Treat, and 33 children at Christmas for Kids.

The congregation opened the new year with the dedication of the stained glass cross windows on January 1, 2017. These were created by Bud Randall for the new sanctuary. In the new year, the congregation continued their efforts to build on and expand their current mission and ministry efforts. In May, the congregation began Time for Tots, a “Mornings with Mommy” structured play group to connect with families with young children in the community. On May 21, Cross of Christ’s daughter congregation, Redemption, dedicated their

recently renovated facility with a special service. Cross of Christ prepared to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with June screenings of the Luther movie *Return to Grace: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther*. A joint Reformation service (*pictured*) to celebrate 500 years of God's grace was held at Cross of Christ with Prince of Peace in Fairport, Our Savior in Springville, and Redemption in Watertown.



The Lord continued to bless their ministry with a record-setting 268 attendees at Trunk or Treat in 2017. Time for Tots grew to 49 attendees in early 2018. 47 children attended Easter for Kids. The congregation completed a 2020 vision plan, a long-range plan for the future direction of Cross of Christ's ministry. God had his own vision for the congregation.

Cross of Christ bid farewell to Pr. Gumm and his family on August 19, 2018.

Cross of Christ once again found themselves in a vacancy. Pr. Aaron Goetzinger from Redemption served as the vacancy pastor. The congregation used this time to make some needed renovations to the parsonage, including a full remodel of the kitchen.



God did not leave the congregation waiting long for a pastor. Pr. Benjamin J. Birner was assigned from the seminary and installed as Cross of Christ's fifth resident pastor on July 21, 2019 (*pictured*). The congregation had been able to continue the majority of their outreach events during the vacancy. It was therefore easy for the new pastor to find his place in these already existing ministries. However, the congregation soon discovered a new challenge: events like VBS and Christmas for Kids seemed

to be less effective at drawing attendees. VBS was down to 11 children in 2019. This proved to be the least of the challenges on the horizon heading into 2020, not only for Cross of Christ, but also for churches and people around the world.

+ 2020-2025 - Changes +

Cross of Christ had big plans for 2020. Pr. Birner was able to attend the WELS' first Lutheran Leadership Conference in January. The congregation was making a big push to invite people to Easter for Kids and their Easter service. That March, the world shut down.

It was a time of great uncertainty, and the news and guidelines about COVID-19 changed quickly. On March 16, Cross of Christ had every intention to continue worshiping in person with a few precautions in place. For example, they suspended their Lenten soup suppers and after-worship snacks while keeping worship in place. The growing news of the coronavirus had prompted them to set up a live stream of worship services. On March 18, the first service was streamed, a midweek Lenten service led by Pr. Mark Westra from Prince of Peace, Rochester. However, just two days later, the council decided to suspend in-person services and make services live-stream only. There were concerns about how a live-stream-only service would affect the joy of the Easter service, so it was planned that whenever Cross of Christ was able to resume in-person gatherings, this would be a triumphant and well-attended Easter service to replace the live-stream-only Easter service of April 12. However, reopening proved to be more of a slow process than return to normal. On June 7, the congregation began meeting again by having two services, one at 9:30 am and one at 10:30 am, with capacity limited to 25 people. It wasn't until July 5th that Onondaga County reached phase 4 of reopening, and Cross of Christ was able to gather together in one service again.

The years of the pandemic were a contentious time. Many congregations lost members in direct response to the actions their congregations took or refused to take. Cross of Christ's response was by no means perfect, nor was perfect consensus possible in all their decisions. Yet by God's grace, they were spared from many of the serious controversies and splits that plagued churches across the country. Cross of Christ was not, however, spared from all the challenges brought by COVID-19. Attendance decreased and membership dropped.

In 2020, the congregation also received bad news concerning their daughter congregation, Redemption. The Board for Home Missions decided to end subsidizing Redemption. The congregation would soon be left without a full-time pastor. A call was extended to Pr. Benjamin Birner to serve as Redemption's part-time pastor on May 30, 2021. Pr. Birner conducted services in Watertown once a month, and Redemption streamed Cross of Christ's services on the remaining Sundays. Redemption agreed to pay for travel expenses and part of Pr. Birner's insurance. This proved to be a blessing for Cross of Christ, because in the summer of 2021, Cross of Christ officially came off subsidy. In the fall of 2021, Redemption was sued by their neighbor over a property line dispute. The combination of COVID, the lack of a full-time pastor, and the lawsuit resulted in Redemption's building being sold in 2025. Redemption continued to meet for service once a month, first at the Ramada in Watertown, then at Immaculate Heart Central Intermediate School.

Despite the difficulties caused by COVID, there were also blessings that came out of the pandemic. It forced Cross of Christ to get their live stream up and running. It prompted the congregation to think about their digital footprint and so update their website. They used this to begin a sermon podcast. Safety guidelines during the pandemic encouraged congregations to avoid using the hymnal and to instead use temporary paper bulletins. As the pandemic came to an end, the congregation was excited to return to using hymnals in conjunction with the release and adoption n of WELS' new hymnal: Christian Worship 2021.

Many aspects of society, and therefore how ministry was done, were changed by the pandemic. The congregation reevaluated its various outreach strategies.



Already before the pandemic, VBS and Christmas for Kids had begun to see lower attendance. After a few missed events due to COVID, it was time to make a change. In 2022, VBS became a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) camp to try to reach more unchurched families (*pictured*). In 2024, Christmas for Kids became a Christmas open house called

Christmas Carnival, to connect with whole families. In 2025, Easter for Kids became another whole family event for the community called Journey to the Cross.

On November 9, 2025, Pr. Jon Bitter returned to guest preach as the congregation was blessed to celebrate their 50th anniversary.

+ The Future... +

This portion was written by Pr. Jeremiah Gumm as the conclusion of Cross of Christ's 40th anniversary history. It has been kept for the current conclusion, with only the anniversary year being changed.

So what does the future hold for Cross of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Liverpool, NY? While we would love to crawl up into the mind of God to find out what he has in store for our congregation, we cannot do so and we can only speculate so much before it becomes dreaming or guessing.

Yet we can know this about the future. God's promises are sure, especially his promise to be with us always to the very end of the age. God's grace is boundless and is always perfectly timed. God's forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice on the cross is always needed. God's mission for his Church remains the same—Take the light of the Gospel to blood-bought souls lost in this sin-darkened world. Bring them Jesus and his grace that they may join us in heaven someday.

As we have seen throughout Cross of Christ's 50-year history, we can be sure that the Lord will always pour out his grace on his people in his own time. To our gracious God be glory forever and ever! Amen.

**May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our ancestors;
may he never leave us nor forsake us. ~ 1 Kings 8:57**