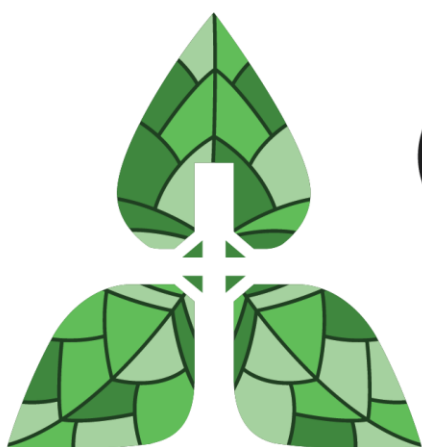


Cross of Life Lutheran Church Congregational History 2006-2024



Cross of Life

Written by

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For the 25th Anniversary of Cross of Life Lutheran Church

Mississauga, Ontario

This paper is to be read as a continuation of "The Mission in Mississauga," a senior church history thesis paper by Rev. Mike Kuschel in 2006, which covers the history of ministry in the Western Greater Toronto Area from WELS' first attempts at ministry until 2006. As of the writing of this paper, "The Mission in Mississauga" is available through the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File.

The beginning of 2006 also marked the beginning of a new chapter in Cross of Life's history. While the congregation was trying to start a second site ministry in the neighbouring town of Milton (which ultimately wouldn't work out), God was doing something else in Milton for Cross of Life. Thirteen acres of land became available at 14212 Derry Rd. East in Milton, just across highway 407 from Cross of Life's target area at the time. Purchasing the Derry Rd. property was quickly sidelined because of the attention given to efforts in Milton and an opportunity to buy a church building in Mississauga. The congregation seriously pursued the purchase of this building located on Glen Erin Dr., but the purchase did not materialize due to challenges in making suitable arrangements.

The year 2006 was the first that Cross of Life carried out an Advent by Candlelight program for women. Pastor Schulz's wife, Dawn, was instrumental in putting on this event and it became a staple of Cross of Life's ministry from that time on.

On February 22, 2008, the deal that eventually secured the Derry Rd. property was signed and it closed in late April. The immediate plan for the property was to sell a portion of the lot and use the remaining land to build a Lutheran Elementary School. At the time, the leadership group was inspired by Divine Savior Lutheran Church, a WELS church in Doral, Florida, which had used a high-quality school as the foundation and primary outreach arm to support a church. This model was reversed from what most people in WELS were used to, namely, a school that grew out of a healthy church. The adapted model seemed to be working in Doral which led the group at Cross of Life to think it could also work in Mississauga/Milton.

The year 2008 was also the first year Cross of Life welcomed a vicar. Frederic (Freddie) Berger was installed in August.

The year 2009 was consumed with planning work for the potential school, with lots of time spent in meetings with local government officials and WELS representatives. Building a school proved to be a great challenge because the town of Milton was unwilling to allow the development of the Derry Rd. land for the potential Cross of Life Academy. Over the next couple years, it became increasingly obvious neither a school nor a church would soon be built on the property.

In 2009, the congregation welcomed its second vicar, Peter Hagen. Hagen was particularly notable for being the first of a handful of vicars who found their wife while serving in Mississauga. Peter married a daughter of the congregation, Desiree (nee Mitchell).

The year 2010 marked the first March Break Camp for Cross of Life, which became a regular part of Cross of Life's ministry for nearly a decade. The camp was almost completely organized by Staff Minister Kevin Walker and, as was Cross of Life's practice, included inviting WELS members from the United States to join in the effort. The camp invited participants to visit different locations around the Toronto area over the five days of March Break and included devotions.

In 2010, the congregation welcomed its third vicar, Phil Moldenhauer.

In 2011, the congregation decided to pursue a "Ministry Centre." The idea was to have a space that was public and more permanent to give the congregation credibility in the community and to make a more suitable place for church events than the current practice of meeting at Pastor Schulz's house.

Originally, the plan was to rent a space in the neighbourhood. After realizing the cost of that option, and as they continued to receive several offers to purchase the property on Derry Rd., the congregation slowed down this plan. Seeing the Derry Rd. property as their best option to have a Ministry Centre, the congregation planned to sell a portion of the property and retain a smaller portion with the proceeds to renovate the farmhouse at the Derry Rd. property. However, in early 2013, the congregation re-evaluated its finances and, with the help of long-time congregational treasurer Paul Keul, and working with the WELS Church Extension Fund, was able to secure a mortgage allowing them to retain the entire 13 acres and have sufficient funds to renovate the farmhouse into a Ministry Centre.

Work on the farmhouse renovation started in the summer of 2013 and was finished at the end of 2014. The new Ministry Centre was in use at the beginning of 2015 and remained in use until 2020. It was dedicated on May 31, 2015, which is remembered by all in attendance as being a day of terrible rain and freezing cold weather. Despite these things, it was an important and joyful day for Cross of Life, marking their first owned and designated facility for full-time ministry.

One notable use of the Ministry Centre, outside of what was already happening in ministry at Cross of Life, was Faith Journey Night. FJN was built to be a whole family spiritual growth night, with teaching for every age group. It met regularly on Wednesdays until 2018.

During these years of pursuing a facility, Cross of Life was also served by 5 vicars: Mark Westra (2011-12), Ben Reichel (2012-13), Paul Krueger (2013-14), Paul Wilde (2014-15), and Craig Birsching (2015-16). Birsching was another vicar to meet his wife

while at Cross of Life. He eventually married a March Break Camp volunteer visiting from the States. Many of these vicars are not only remembered for their service in the ministry, but also for needing to be handy on a job site. Most of them participated extensively in the Derry Rd. farmhouse renovations under the direction of Cross of Life member Fred Aulich who served as the project manager.

It should be noted that during the early part of the 2010s and into the later part of the decade, Cross of Life settled into a rather consistent and effective strategy of ministry. They primarily focused their outreach on what they called “The 5 Pillars:” Soccer Camp, March Break Camp, Easter, Advent by Candlelight, and Christmas Eve. These events drew impressive amounts of people, especially for a congregation of Cross of Life’s size. For example, Soccer Camp consistently drew nearly 300 children, March Break Camp nearly 100 children, Advent by Candlelight similarly nearly 100 women, and Easter Egg Hunts that directed families to Easter worship brought in between 500-700 people at their height, with 200-300 staying to hear the message of the Resurrection at Easter worship.

Of these ministries, Soccer Camp is perhaps the most notable. An innovative idea at the time, it grew to become a phenomenon across the WELS that many other congregations copied. Cross of Life became known across the synod as “the church that does the soccer camp.” This was not only because of the size of the program, but also because of the many people from across the WELS who came to Mississauga to help with the camp yearly. Many of these people came on mission trips associated with their church or school, but some even came at their own cost because of a love for the ministry. Soccer Camp was certainly the most outwardly obvious thing that Cross of Life did, but it was also the most successful from a

numbers point of view, becoming a way many people became connected to the congregation. It also served a galvanizing purpose among the members of the congregation, helping build friendships as they organized and executed the massive undertaking Soccer Camp grew to become.

After the dedication of the Ministry Centre in 2015, Cross of Life had a notable increase in new members. In 2016, Cross of Life's membership reached its peak of 162 members along with its highest average worship attendance of 100 people. It was also the year the congregation welcomed its ninth vicar, Tom Gorzalski, who would marry Cross of Life member, Deanne (nee Williams).

In March 2017, Pastor Joel Schulz announced that he had accepted a call to plant a church in Delray Beach, Florida. Pastor Schulz had served nearly 18 years at Cross of Life as its founding pastor. He left for Florida in June of that year, leaving the ministry in the hands of Staff Minister Kevin Walker and Vicar Tom Gorzalski, who remained at Cross of Life to finish his vicar year, rather than follow Pastor Schulz to Florida.

Pastor Schulz is remembered by many at Cross of Life for his tireless work ethic, his creative ideas for outreach, his extreme attention to detail (which is illustrated in the meticulous records of his ministry that are the foundation for this paper), his love of the Green Bay Packers, and for being a spiritual father to many who got to know Jesus for the first time through his ministry.

Cross of Life was without a pastor from June 2017 until July 2018. At first, worship was led by Vicar Gorzalski until he returned to the Seminary in August of 2017. After that, worship was covered by a combination of Pastor Mark Henrich from

Hope Lutheran in Toronto (who served as the vacancy pastor), the vicar from Hope in Toronto, Ben Berger, and video sermons from other WELS pastors while Staff Minister Walker presided over the liturgy. Cross of Life extended 9 calls for a pastor during this time.

As many of the members of Cross of Life would attest (and as is true in most vacancies), this time was a blessing and challenge for Cross of Life. Since Pastor Schulz and his wife Dawn were so integral to the ministry at Cross of Life, there were significant challenges in continuing the ministries they started and maintained.

However, this was also a time for Cross of Life to find its identity apart from the Schulzes, to step up and take on the various ministry efforts, and to evaluate what Cross of Life would look like in the future. During this time, the congregation embarked on a long process of congregational reorganization. This included setting a new plan for the ministry based on the new reality of being without the Schulzes and vicars. The congregation nearly completed this project but waited to find out who their next pastor would be in order to finalize their plan.

In May of 2018, Caleb Schultz was called to be the next pastor at Cross of Life. Schultz had served two years as a tutor at Luther Preparatory School and was being reassigned into ministry from the Seminary. He came with his wife, Johannah (nee Crass). He was installed on July 29, 2018. Schultz was a Canadian citizen by birth, which brought extra excitement to the assignment.

The very next day, Staff Minister Walker received a call to serve as the Early Childhood Director at Bethlehem Lutheran in Germantown, Wisconsin. He accepted the call in August of 2018 and moved to Wisconsin in October. Staff Minister Walker

served at Cross of Life for just over 16 years, and is remembered for his warm personality, his empathy, his willingness to serve in whatever way was needed, and his good humour in all situations.

As Pastor Schultz transitioned into the congregation, the new plan for ministry was finalized. A significant departure from the previous philosophy of ministry, this plan essentially eliminated all programmatic forms of outreach and ministry, such as March Break Camp, Soccer Camp, and Advent by Candlelight, and instead enacted a simplified ministry model focused on building personal relationships, both internally among the congregation and externally as a method to share the gospel. This was in response to two realities that the congregation recognized. First, the congregation had gone from three full-time staff (Pastor, Staff Minister, Vicar... and their wives) to one. This made it very challenging to maintain the same pace of ministry, since many of the congregational activities had been primarily run by staff. Second, over the past couple years, the congregation had noticed that nearly all the growth they were experiencing was not in response to these programs, but to personal invitations. They felt the programs were requiring more of their people than they were producing in growth. And while those programs had served an important purpose in the growth and development of the congregation, they were now losing momentum.

In 2019, this new model for ministry was rolled out alongside a stewardship campaign that was intended to be a catalyst for getting Cross of Life into its own public worship facility. The campaign raised about \$200,000 in donations and increased ongoing offerings. On the success of the campaign, the congregation began earnestly seeking a place to worship that was their own.

In February of 2020, an arrangement was made with another congregation, Mississauga Victory Church, to share their converted warehouse as a church facility. As part of the move, Cross of Life would vacate the Ministry Centre and convert it back to a home to be rented. In March of 2020, Cross of Life moved into the building at 20-2900 Argentia Rd, Mississauga. After over 15 years of worship at Lisgar Middle School, this was a significant change that solidified a near entire overhaul of life at Cross of Life. The entire staff, ministry plan, location, and even worship time all had changed. While the core things about Cross of Life, such as a blend of old and new in worship, a focus on teaching, and an emphasis on community were still there, the outward trappings of the congregation were very different.

After only worshipping in their new location for two weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Canada, which included a mandate by the government to close places of worship in order to stop the spread of the disease. While the pandemic presented immense challenges for everyone, it was easy to see the Lord Jesus' hand in Cross of Life's development. Had they not moved into that new location only two weeks earlier, they would have been at the mercy of the Peel District School Board, which did not issue rental permits again until sometime in 2022. This would have made it very hard for Cross of Life to hold public worship or conduct many of its ministries during that time. As it was, the facility made it possible for Cross of Life to continue worship, offering private services and Holy Communion during the pandemic.

The overall effect of the pandemic on Cross of Life was again a challenge and a blessing. While it did precipitate a number of members leaving the congregation, it also helped reset and refocus the rest of the members. Those who remained as

regular attendees and members after the pandemic found joy in being together and rebuilding the ministry together.

As the pandemic subsided, the congregation made the decision to sell the Derry Rd. property, seeing that it had no chance of working for them as a potential church home. The process of preparing the property for sale, listing it, negotiations, and closing took a few years, but the property was finally sold in 2024 for a price of \$9 million.

The congregation came back from the pandemic very strong. Worship attendance returned to pre-pandemic levels relatively quickly and began to increase in 2023 and into 2024 as the congregation was finally able to enact their 2019 plans for personal, discipleship-focused ministry.

In early 2024, the congregation experienced tremendous growth as a result of a refugee shelter the Peel Region government opened across the street from Cross of Life's location on Argentia Rd. Approximately 75 new refugees (all from the African continent) came to Cross of Life in a span of about 3 months, and as of the writing of this paper, over 20 of them became part of the congregation, with some still on the path to membership.

In the early summer of 2024, Cross of Life signed an agreement to purchase a property at 2556 Meadowpine Blvd. in Mississauga for \$5.05 million, which they intend to use as their permanent church home. As of the writing of this paper, the deal is still conditional on city approval.

Of course, it is impossible to articulate all the things that could be said about the ministry of Cross of Life in a paper. These events are more than just words on a

page. They were the lived experiences of people who love Jesus and called Cross of Life their church home. But on this 25th anniversary, this author believes many would agree that Cross of Life's history to this point has been marked by a few distinct ideas.

First, a need to be creative and flexible. Mississauga has changed significantly from 1999 to 2024, nearly tripling in population and steadily increasing its representation of ethnicities and cultures. Cross of Life has had to learn to continually adapt and create new ways to reach this city through its changes.

Second, faithfulness in the face of challenge. Mississauga is notorious for being a city of transient people. Throughout Cross of Life's history, the congregation has had to regularly contend with members leaving the congregation simply because they are moving. Cross of Life has never been a place where many stay for long, and someone has always needed to step up to fill the voids left by those who move on.

Third, a desire to "think big." Cross of Life has always had an attitude that pursued big ideas, even when they seemed unreachable. And even when some of those ideas failed, the congregation continued to pursue new big goals. From older ideas like a school, a multi-site ministry, or programs that served hundreds, to newer ideas around planting churches and training new pastors in Canada to serve Canadians, Cross of Life has always tried to punch above its weight.

Fourth, and finally, a desire to build community beyond Sunday morning. Throughout its history, Cross of Life has had a culture of being in each other's lives and homes, supporting one another, serving alongside one another, and just simply

being friends. No one who has visited Cross of Life throughout its 25-year history could deny that it was a congregation where people knew each other and cared about each other.

To conclude, a personal word from the author¹:

When I came to Cross of Life in 2018, someone that I met in the community who found out that I pastored a church in the Meadowvale/Lisgar area claimed, “That’s where church planters go to die.” He then articulated a number of congregations that tried to start in northwest Mississauga but failed after a few years. Whether or not he really knew what he was talking about is immaterial. That story accents to me that to see Cross of Life here after 25 years says very little about us and a lot about Jesus. A Lutheran church should not, at least on paper, work here. The culture, the cost, and the pace of life are not what typically “works” for Lutherans like us. But here we are, 25 years of grace. Not ultimately because of Joel Schulz, Kevin Walker, me, or anyone else who has been part of this church... but because of Jesus. He builds his church. Today, we rejoice that he has chosen to build it here for 25 years, and that he has chosen to use us to do so.

SDG

¹ With special thanks to Joel Schulz, Kevin Walker, Will Lomker, and Kevin Schultz for their efforts in content and editing on this paper.