

## "Gone to the Dogs"

Gloria Dei, Garland

It all started in 2008 when Dolly, a 4 pound long-haired Chihuahua, and her Handler/Mom became a Registered Pet Partners Team. Pet Partners is an organization dedicated to improving people's health through positive interactions with therapy animals.

The church home for this team is Gloria Dei Lutheran in Garland.

When the member told her Pastor about the new team, he said that we should do something special to recognize her pending journey to share God's love. From that point, as they say, the rest is history.

Thus was born the Commissioning, which is similar to Confirmation of our young adults.

Several Pet Partners joined the church and a Commissioning Service was offered for them also. It was beautiful to see them at the Communion rail side by side waiting to be blessed by the Pastor: "We lift \_\_\_\_\_ before you Lord, asking that as a result of gentle encounters with them, people might experience comfort and healing - as well as encouragement for facing both life and death." Each animal received a Gloria Dei commemorative bandana and certificate. The Service concluded with a pot luck lunch. Church members organizing the first lunch asked if we needed a volunteer to guard the food. Pastor replied that the dogs would behave better than our kids do. And that they did!

**Many of our dogs are rescues; we encourage adoption. You can see the love and appreciation in their eyes. They are so willing to share God's love with everyone.**

It was decided that all Pet Partners teams were welcome at church and related activities. The Council voted to begin a new mission, Creation Care, based upon God's directive that we are to be the stewards of all God's creations.

We had a Pet Partners group, A New Leash on Life, who had meetings, conducted workshops and held Team Evaluations for prospective and renewing teams. The group was invited to use the church facilities for their activities.

Over the years, we have taught workshops to hundreds of prospective team Handlers and evaluated over a thousand teams wanting to become Pet Partners.

We have offered Commissioning Services, held during a regular service, to bless hundreds of newly evaluated teams.

We now have an annual Blessing of the Animals under a tent canopy on the front yard of the church on the first Sunday of October, open to all the community, commemorating St. Francis Day.

We offer a Recognition Service to honor retired team members and those who have passed/crossed the Rainbow Bridge.

We also host low-cost Pet Vaccinations provided by TCAP at the church several times annually.

When the former Bishop visited the church, he was so enamored with the dogs that he hurried around taking photos. At Communion, he managed to pass bread to each animal at the rail, each of which sat and waited their turn. He wrote a devotional about his experience, stating that if Jesus returned to earth, perhaps he should return as a dog - the purest example of love and grace.

We have seen God's work in our visits to nursing homes, hospitals, schools, rehab, hospice, etc but also in the church.

One lady who grew up in Gloria Dei came back to visit after many years. She heard that we did something with dogs. She soon fell in love with the program, trained her dog and became a PP team. She later decided to stay and became a member and currently serves on the church Council with another PP who was drawn to the church because of the mission. God works in mysterious ways.

Pet Partners teams attended a Celebration service for one of the members who really loved the dogs. A family member remarked later that the service was so wonderful - that it felt like we were in God's living room!

We assist the Community by hosting adoption events and yard sales for rescue organizations.

We help at Children's Moments and even had our Thrivent Representative visit with his grandsons who were really afraid of dogs. He believed that these dogs would be the most non-threatening of all. And sure enough, by the end of the Service, they were petting the dogs and posing for photos.

Our Congregation is wonderful in assisting with the socialization of teams. They share the peace and some dogs shake hands. They help newbies become more socialized and develop skills at meeting new people and being crowded and petted. They are readily

accepted as part of our work and even are included in our mission statement. Our former Pastor, now retired, trained his adopted dog, and became a Pet Partner because he so believed in the service they give so freely to all. When looking for a new Pastor we told all we interviewed that creation care is part of who we are.

We laughingly say that Gloria Dei has "gone to the dogs."

As time passed, it was decided that another program represented by some of our members should become a part of Gloria Dei. Feral Friends, who rescues feral cats, began using some now unused Sunday School rooms to house a few cats and kittens. Many of the Gloria Dei members love cats and assist the Feral Friends volunteers with shifts of feeding, cleaning and loving. Each cat receives vet care, is neutered/spayed and then adopted. Hundreds of homeless kitties have passed through Gloria Dei and now have good homes. One woman even adopted two blind kittens who now go with her to her Board Meetings.

We believe that creation care is a long neglected mission in our world, as our earth readily shows us daily. We use creation care at Gloria Dei to provide an uplifting environment in the church and then go out into the world and fulfill Gloria Dei's mission to share Christ's love. What better ...than to be known for our love and compassion for all of God's creations and sharing it.

**An animal's eyes have the power to  
speak a great language...**