

CHURCH OF THE SAVIOR 2024 PARISH PROFILE

Overview

The Church of the Savior (COTS) is a congregation of the Anglican Church of North America. The congregation is located in Ambridge, a former steel mill town on the Ohio River. Ambridge is racially diverse. A significant number of people (13%) live below the poverty line, and the neighborhood around our church in south Ambridge is known to be one of the poorest in town.

Parish Vision, Core Values, and Distinctives

The Church of the Savior is a Holy Spirit-filled community formed by the Word of God, transformed by the love of Jesus, and sent to extend God's Kingdom in Ambridge and to the ends of the earth. We create a safe place for people to be known and loved, invited into relationship with Jesus, and sent out to build the Kingdom of God in Ambridge and around the world.

The core values of the Church of the Savior are:

- Worship as our first response to God
- Obedience to his Word, empowered by the Holy Spirit
- Healing brokenness by experiencing grace and pursuing holiness in Jesus
- Inviting neighbors and the nations to know God's love and follow Jesus

The Church of the Savior began as an outreach to children by seminarians at Trinity School for Ministry and first met in Joe (a second-year seminarian) and Valerie Vitunic's living room in 1984. From the start God has enabled the Church of the Savior to care for people who have no one else to care for them, and to train, equip and send disciples throughout the US and abroad.

One of COTS' distinctive features has always been the wide variety of people who participate. As one first-time visitor remarked, "There was a coal miner's daughter sitting next to a seminary professor sitting next to a bishop sitting next to a bag lady. And then the bag lady got up to read the Scripture lesson!... Maybe there would be a place for me here."

The three prominent constituencies served by the parish are 1) individuals, families and children from the margins in Ambridge, 2) seminarians at the nearby Trinity School for Ministry, and 3) residents from the surrounding communities from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

Lifetime Values

These three core constituencies provide COTS a unique opportunity to equip disciples to make disciples and be sent to serve in the U.S. and abroad. Working with people on the margins in Ambridge prepares leaders for ministry in a world that needs Jesus. As the only Anglican Church in the same town as Trinity School for Ministry, COTS has been an excellent training ground for

nearly 100 pastors, missionaries, and church planters, including a steady stream from overseas—six of whom have become Bishops, including two provincial Archbishops!

Discipling people to disciple others is a common theme in all our outreach ventures and is valuable for recognized leaders and for all disciples.

Healing from brokenness of all kinds has been a special emphasis for the Church of the Savior from its beginning. The parish offers short- and long-term healing care groups with a focus on interpersonal relationship skills, forgiveness, grieving losses, and healing wounds to set people free to be more like Christ. Many COTS members have been involved as participants (and trained as teachers, small group leaders, intercessors, and hosts) in Freedom in Christ retreats. These have had a major impact not only on COTS members but also on diocesan clergy, seminarians, and other churches here and even in other states. The transparent rich fellowship in these groups prompts many to respond, “This is what church is really supposed to be!”

Oversight and Administration

The Rev. Dennett Buettner has been rector of COTS since 2006. He and his wife (now Deacon) Andrea were early members of COTS while they were students at Trinity School for Ministry. Dennett has served COTS full time throughout his tenure. He currently oversees a staff of three part time employees (an administrator, a bookkeeper, and a sexton) and a budget in 2024 of just under \$150,000. He and other clergy consistently preach Biblical sermons, and he has given himself wholeheartedly to this ministry, particularly in mentoring young leaders, and we thank God for Dennett and Andrea.

Worship, Discipleship, Prayer

COTS liturgy is from the 2019 ACNA Book of Common Prayer. During worship the liturgy is projected on an overhead screen, making books and leaflets unnecessary. Music styles at COTS have always varied—from contemporary to hymns to spirituals (and even an accordion at one point!). The one common denominator is that COTS’ worship has always been worship of the living God, NOT a performance.

The Holy Spirit is welcome during our services. There is a time of quiet to listen to the Lord during worship, and we value the gifts of the Spirit. COTS has received a number of encouraging prophetic words about revival over the years, and we are waiting in hope on the Lord.

A small team of intercessors meets weekly before church. COTS has a Prayer Chain that operates during the week as individual needs arise. There is a prayer team at the back of the church that prays for healing and other needs as people come back from Communion.

Small group membership is also an integral part of COTS’ corporate life. Seventy percent of COTS members participate in small groups that meet weekly (some by Zoom) to pray for each

other and study the Bible together. Some groups have been meeting for over 30 years, and new groups continue to form. A men's monthly breakfast meeting just started. The small groups include present, former, and non-COTS members.

Missions and Outreach

Former COTS parishioners have or are now serving long-term in Brazil, eastern Europe, Egypt, and Ethiopia. In recent years COTS members have participated in cross-cultural mission trips to several nations. As well as providing valuable training for mission at home, short-term mission trips have become an important testing ground for long-term missionary service.

The Missions Committee meets monthly to pray for missionaries and find financial and practical ways to support COTS alumni who serve cross-culturally.

COTS has been deeply involved with the New Wineskins Missionary Network—all the directors of New Wineskins have attended COTS at some point. At the 2022 New Wineskins conference, 46 (3%) of the 1600 participants and workshop leaders were COTS members or alumni.

COTS hosts Signs of Grace, a ministry to the local Deaf community. A core group of five gathers monthly for a video Bible study led by two women from the parish—one teaches American Sign Language (ASL) at Geneva College, and the other is a Child of Deaf Adults (CODA) who also initiated training for Deaf mission and arranged for ASL interpreters at the New Wineskins for Global Mission conferences.

On the last Sunday of every month, we serve a free hot lunch (“Kyrie Cafe”) for about 40 people, including COTS members, residents of the Maplewood Personal Care Home on our block, and other neighbors from the community. The program starts with a testimony, prayer requests, or a brief reflection from Scripture, and we all say grace, pray the Lord's prayer, and recognize birthdays. Parishioners are encouraged to mingle with our guests, invite spiritual conversations and look for opportunities to connect with people of peace.

The vestry deliberately chose “the wrong side of town” when we moved to this location and that call has not changed.

Hard times: Disability, Episcopal/Anglican split, Pandemic

It has been a wonderful blessing to welcome so many gifted and committed people year after year—but it has also been a source of grief as we keep having to say goodbye to people we love. Seminarians go on to new vocations; professional people make career moves; working poor or those on fixed incomes leave suddenly after a lost job or an illness or death of a family member.

The Rev. Joe Vitunic's retirement in 2006 due to disability was another source of grief for the congregation. We love the Vitunics dearly, Joe visits us occasionally, and Valerie attends weekly.

Many committed parishioners, especially families with teenagers, left during the long Episcopal/Anglican split.

The pandemic decimated our Sunday school and youth group, which was heartbreaking and discouraging, especially since reaching children is how COTS started. The children's Sunday school and youth group have restarted. We are particularly hoping for an energetic pastor with evangelistic gifts who can lead us in reaching young people in Ambridge.

In all, our average Sunday attendance went from a high of 180 in the 1990s to a low of 45. At the beginning of 2023, our parish directory listed 35 individual and family units as members, 45 "Friends of the Congregation" who love us—some of them still support COTS financially—but no longer attend (usually for geographical reasons), and 12 missionaries (many COTS alumni) whom we pray for and support. The congregation grew by about 5% in 2023.

Current Challenges

COTS members care for one another well on a personal level, but with our small congregation, there is often little space to rest, receive ministry, and participate in worship. We have many ways for lay people to participate in leading worship, which we value. However, on most Sundays many of us have more than one responsibility—from reader to officiant to music team to projection to online host to nursery to Church School to prayer team, etc. Kyrie Cafe was actually conceived as a place for the congregation to experience fellowship and rest—but quickly became a successful outreach to our neighbors. We do have Game Nights occasionally to just enjoy each other's company!

New Opportunities

COTS members exhibited adaptability and resilience during the pandemic. Instead of a sit down meal for Kyrie Cafe, we handed out box lunches in our parking lot the last Sunday of the month. When the rec center in the projects closed (where COTS had had a weekly children's outreach since 2010), members prayer-walked the streets. The pandemic provided new opportunities to minister online. Sunday worship and the Rector's midweek Bible study are live-streamed and archived on our YouTube channel and viewed by homebound members and friends near and far. During the pandemic COTS bought a computer so Maplewood Personal Care Home residents down the street could follow the Sunday service. Now Deacon Laura Wicker leads a weekly Bible study there, and several of the residents attend COTS every Sunday. Raymond's "Hallelujah! Goodbye everybody! See you next week!" at the close of services brings us all joy.

Our average Sunday attendance has started increasing again slowly. Several couples and retired clergy have joined COTS in the past year or so, young families are growing, one adult and an infant were baptized this Easter, and two people were confirmed this fall. COTS is sponsoring two candidates for ordination.

Accomplishments

Much of our membership is transient, so we have to think in terms of value added. The combination of rising leaders in a context of need has been an excellent training ground for lay and ordained leaders here and around the world. Many COTS alumni have devoted their lives to serving people on the margins of society. COTS alumni express their appreciation how the parish models Biblical faithfulness, diversity, authenticity, love for mission, and enabling of leaders.

Thanks be to God, with sacrificial giving and sweat equity of parishioners and the help of many friends, we have now completed the major repairs and renovations on our building, hopefully eliminating the need for major building maintenance for twenty years. In January 2023 COTS paid off its mortgage early. Although many of our members are in seminary or on a fixed income, almost half of the \$450,000 total raised for our building came from within the parish.

Vision for the Future

As our core leaders have gathered to hear God's direction, we have found much in our past to celebrate, much in the present that is worth preserving, and much to challenge us as we anticipate new ministry in a changing world. One constant we anticipate is the basic need of our community with many who are distressed, marginalized, isolated, and alienated. Our desire remains, as it has been, to create safe places for people to encounter Jesus.

COTS has several Spanish-speaking members, and we are reaching out to the growing Hispanic community in Ambridge and Beaver County by providing English as a Second Language classes in our building. We believe these classes have a real potential of leading to the formation of a Spanish-speaking Anglican congregation at COTS.

We are asking the Lord of the harvest to raise up laborers for his harvest. Prayer is absolutely crucial for the ventures to which God will call Church of the Savior in coming months and years—ventures we could never dream of attempting without His calling and provision.

There are many ministry opportunities around us that we would love to engage in if we had the people to undertake them. These are only a few: prayer-walking the neighborhood, reestablishing an outreach to unchurched youth, a Bible study group for our nearby neighbors to build on the ministry of Kyrie Cafe, reigniting our children's outreach at a local subsidized housing project and extending it to children near our building; and offering Financial Peace University at a subsidized rate for the working poor here.

One of COTS most pressing needs is for people to come join us in ministry. We have a vision much bigger than the ability of our current members to meet. We have been emphasizing training disciples for mission in our local context, and we are asking God to provide workers who feel called to the Church of the Savior and to Ambridge.

Addendum: Some Illustrative Stories from COTS History

It all began with a bus ride in 1983. Joe Vitunic, a second year seminarian at Trinity School for Ministry, had agreed to chaperon his daughter's field trip to Pittsburgh for second graders at Anthony Wayne School in Ambridge. The fifteen boys in the back of the bus started acting up immediately, and Joe called the ringleader "George" up to sit next to him. When Joe asked, "What do you like to do with your father?" George immediately blurted out, "My dad is a PIG! And if he ever comes back my mother and grandmother are going to call the police!" The mixture of rage and terror coming from that little boy was shocking.

When George returned to his seat, Joe turned to watch him, and to his utter astonishment, five or six boys simultaneously jumped out of their seats, waved their hands in the air and cried out, "Can I be next, can I be next?" As Joe talked to the boys one by one, he learned that 10 of the 12 boys had no father, and they had some of the most heart-rending stories he had ever heard.

Joe and his wife Valerie began to pray, and as he shared this at Trinity seminary, so did others. A group of seminarians decided to start an after school program one day a week called Kids' Club. They passed out flyers and over 60 white, black, Asian, and Hispanic kids showed up the first day. It continued for years and grew—and that is how the Church of the Savior began.

God used COTS to make a significant impact on our neighbors. Dave lived in the Maplewood Personal Care Home, and a friend invited him to our video Bible study. At first, Dave sat silent in meetings, not making eye contact. As time went on, he began to offer an occasional comment, with growing insight, and to pray out loud. One night, invited by the leader, Dave prayed to invite Jesus into his heart. After that Dave invited other residents to the Bible study; and some came. When Dan, a member of the video Bible study, had surgery, Dave and a friend from Maplewood visited Dan and prayed with him. Shortly afterward we heard that Dave had passed away suddenly. As we planned his memorial service, we reflected that Dave was a great example of the kind of disciples COTS produces. He met Jesus and shared him with others. Others might overlook Dave, but Jesus saw him, and by God's mercy COTS was there to invest in Dave.

"Violet" attended COTS occasionally because she lived in an apartment close by. She got engaged to "Sam", who had had troubles with the law. As they went through marriage preparation, Sam was able to hear in a new way that Jesus really did love him and had forgiven him. We were able to bless them by hosting their friends for a wedding where the Gospel was preached—and party. They moved soon after and we lost touch with them; but they took with them a hope for their future together that they didn't have when they came to COTS.

In January 2018, a regular participant invited her friend Sadie to come to COTS children's outreach in the local housing project. Sadie had never heard of Jesus or been to church, but wanted to be with her friend. Sadie kept coming for eight months despite schedule changes, significant relational conflicts, and her insistence that she was bored or didn't remember what we talked about the week before. A seminarian asked her why she kept coming back, and she admitted she "wanted to have a relationship with Jesus." While she often wears the same teenage couldn't-care-less mask, Sadie demonstrates a growing knowledge of the Scriptures, a Spirit-

gifted capacity to lead those her age and younger in prayer and in small groups, and an unwavering awareness of God's love for her in Jesus.

The vestry and other parishioners were gathered for an extended morning of prayer, study, encouragement, and to listen to God together. One of our members sensed God was speaking to us through Isaiah 30:15 "Thus said the LORD God, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.'" Over time we became increasingly aware that the LORD was calling us to rest—paradoxically, since we were quite aware how much work needed to be done to grow our ministry. Just before we were going to share this on Sunday, another of our members said: "I [the Lord] have made you weak so that My strength may flow through you. The time is coming, and coming soon, that you will take up My strength and move." Then Pastor Dave's sermon was on "in repentance and rest there will be the harvest." Taken together, we heard the Lord's answer to our concerns—to do the work he has given us to do in Ambridge and beyond we need to develop an even deeper level of trust in him. Effective ministry requires cultivating an awareness of God speaking to us and seeking him and his purposes and direction for COTS.

"Hello, there. God has a word for you!" was how the Lord had David greet a total stranger, "Mohammed." In 2016 COTS helped send five members (the rector, three recent grads from Trinity, and a public school teacher) to Germany for three weeks to do intensive church planting training with an international mission agency. The goal was to reach some of the nearly 200,000 Middle Eastern refugees living in camps around Hamburg with the Good News of Jesus.

The team spent six months preparing, praying, and receiving cross-cultural training from Sarah (a COTS member with extensive missions experience) and COTS alumna "Rebecca" and her husband "Mark," leaders of the international missions agency.

Now we were visiting a refugee housing center. David's unusual greeting got Mohammad's attention. Then David said, "God knows you have three sisters who had been captured by ISIS, and God is saying they will all escape!" Mohammed's eyes got as big as saucers. He invited our team to visit his family's room which Mohammed and his brother and sister shared with their mother, who was ill in bed. Our team prayed for healing and shared the story of Jesus healing the paralyzed man. Although not instantly, the mother's health improved. The two sons began to meet daily with us to do Discovery Bible Study in what we called "the Church under the tree."

Mohammed's brother is now a leader in a house church movement among refugees that has grown to at least 36 groups, and David is using the training he received at COTS to plant a church among expatriate Nigerians in Colorado.