

## HOLY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HILL OVERLOOKING ROBESONIA

### ST. DANIEL'S PRESCHOOL – Little Learners, Big Blessings

Opening in 1989, St. Daniel's Preschool is celebrating its 37th year in 2026! It has been one of the most successful outreach programs of St. Daniel's Lutheran Church. The Preschool is designed to provide three-, four-, and five-year-old children the opportunity to develop individually, socially, academically, and spiritually in an atmosphere of Christian love and principles. It strives to provide a secure environment away from home so that each child can develop a sense of self-worth, become more independent, and be prepared for their future educational experience. The Preschool provides age-appropriate curriculum and activities that are centered on weekly themes including the alphabet, special holidays, creative art, creative play, music, poetry, math, science, and writing skills. Students also enjoy both indoor and outdoor play areas and a variety of extracurricular activities and field trips.

St. Daniel's Preschool grew out of the vision and commitment of church members who wanted to provide a valuable service to the community while also welcoming young families into the life of the congregation. The ideas for creating and structuring a Preschool were generated in cottage meetings held during the Pastorate of Rev. Edward Cloughen. Small groups met to discuss issues and concerns of the congregation, and one of those concerns was the lack of parents of young children among the membership. The idea of a church-related Preschool was thought of as a possibility for reaching that segment of the population. This topic was discussed at length in the cottage meetings held at various members' homes. At the time of these discussions, Samuel Thomas was President of Church Council. When his Council term ended, Sam continued to work diligently on turning the Preschool ideas into reality. Sam Thomas, Robert Bright, Patsy Bright, Lori Small, Richard Labe, Brian Yoh, and Susie Zerbe formed a committee to research the Preschool idea and determine the financial feasibility of such a project. Statistics showed that Robesonia and the surrounding communities were growing, other local Preschools were at capacity, and waiting lists already existed. St. Daniel's was a logical location for a Preschool because the church had facilities that could accommodate the program. Trinity Lutheran Church in Wernersville was helpful in openly sharing information about their budget and past experiences with operating a church-related Preschool. In December 1988, the committee put together a proposal that included an organizational structure and economic plan for a Preschool. It was agreed to move forward. St. Daniel's Preschool opened for the 1989-90 school year.

St. Daniel's Preschool has welcomed children with a wide range of learning styles, abilities, and developmental needs, building a reputation as a caring, inclusive learning environment for all children. While rooted in a Christian environment and guided by strong Christian principles, St. Daniel's Preschool has made a sincere effort to welcome families of all faith backgrounds. Sam Thomas noted, "We deliberated at length over our name and decided not to include 'Lutheran' in the name 'St. Daniel's Preschool,' while still showing attachment to our congregation."

Initially, in 1989, the committee set up a one-class program with 15 to 20 students. Later, enrollment increased to two classes, with the Preschool and Nursery programs serving a total of 28 students. Since then, the class structure and enrollment have changed with the times. After 30 years, in 2019, it was estimated that total attendance, including both of the Preschool and Pre-K classes, was about 840 students. Current classes include Preschool for children 3+, held for 2-1/4 hours 2 days per week; and Pre-K for children 4+, held for 2-1/2 hours 3 days per week.

The St. Daniel's Preschool staff regularly meets with the staff of the Conrad Weiser school district in order to keep the curriculum current with their expectations for incoming Kindergarten students. Throughout its existence, the Board of Directors has received positive feedback from the public schools noting that St. Daniel's preschoolers have been well-prepared.

Like the rest of the world, St. Daniel's Preschool was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three school years were affected: 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22. In Spring 2020, the Preschool had to be closed for in-classroom teaching for 2-1/2 months. Within three days of closing in mid-March 2020, instructional videos were being prepared for families to use at home; worksheets were made available by using email and US Mail; and Facebook videos were employed. This online teaching mode replaced classroom teaching for the last two weeks of March and all of April and May 2020. These methods were continued with the start of a new school year and throughout Fall of 2020. Thanks to the dedication, creativity, and resourcefulness of the staff, online teaching capabilities steadily advanced, finding ways to continue offering the best program possible for the students and families. A tremendous thank you to Lorelei Lewis, Donna Boyer, Jan Miller, and Judy Dalesandro for their commitment, determination, and flexibility! During the Summer of 2020, the staff developed a Health & Safety Plan under PA Department of Education guidelines that allowed the St. Daniel's Preschool to open in September 2020 with classroom teaching. Berks County transmission risks reached the "substantial" rating in mid-November, so the Preschool moved to online teaching for December 2020 through

February 2021 before returning to classroom teaching. For the 2021-22 school year, the Preschool was still faced with low enrollment and COVID-related uncertainties. As a result, the program was restructured from 5 days/week to 3 days/week.

Since the first Fall Fest in 1991, Pastor Ron Weir [Pastor, 1989-1994] suggested that Church Council invest capital from that event to support the Preschool. Thanks to that financial support, St. Daniel's has been able to keep tuition affordable for young families. Additionally, from 2018 to 2025, St. Daniel's was a "Pre-Kindergarten Scholarship Organization" (PKSO) and participated in the Pennsylvania Education Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) Program. We partnered with Trinity Lutheran Preschool in Wernersville in order to satisfy PA requirements that at least two Preschool programs must be supported by an approved PKSO. From 2018 until the 2025-26 school year, we were able to reduce tuition for families in both Preschools by \$16,000. When Trinity Wernersville discontinued its Preschool in 2025, St. Daniel's was unable to find another EITC partner and therefore no longer qualified as a PKSO. This year, for the 2026-27 school year, St. Daniel's Preschool began a Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) to replace the EITC Program. Funding for the TAP awards is from a portion of the former St. Daniel's Scholarship Fund that was designated to be used by the Preschool. This funding source will be referred to as the "Early Learning Program Fund."

St. Daniel's Preschool would not exist without the ongoing commitment of the St. Daniel's members who have served on its behalf for almost four decades. Sam Thomas has served as the President of the Board of Directors since the Preschool's founding in 1989! The original Board included Patsy Bright, Brian Yoh, Susie Zerbe, and Betty Bashore. Other members who serve(d) on the Preschool board or help(ed) with its administration include Kathy Yarnall, Jenny Plassio, Brian Lewis, Jim Griesemer, and Tyler Ravert, along with various liaisons to Church Council.

St. Daniel's Preschool has been blessed with dedicated and talented staff members throughout the years. The following list honors those individuals; we offer our sincere apologies if anyone has been inadvertently omitted here or from the list of Board members. Many thanks to all!!!

*Preschool Director / Administrator:*

Nancy Buttimer – 1989-2000; Lee Ann Raess – 2000-2011; Donna Boyer – 2011-2021;  
Lorelei Lewis – 2021-present

Teacher & Teacher's Aide:

Nancy Buttimer (founding Teacher), Linda Baum (founding Teacher's Aide), Lee Ann Raess, Donna Boyer, Donna Kuipers, Terese Riemenschneider, Kelly Sabold, Jan Miller, Lorelei Lewis

Teacher's Aide:

Judy Dalesandro, Brian Lewis, Jennifer Pence, Heather Green, Ashley Walter, Jenny Plassio, Jim Griesemer

Several current and former St. Daniel's members have volunteered with the Preschool. Lovingly known as "Miss Marge," the late Marge Baernkopf began volunteering as an aide to the Nursery class in 1990 and continued in the position until her death in November 1999. Daisy Hess and Carole Schmehl were also volunteers, and Linda Preston, Joy Kline, Rev. Rebecca Knox [Pastor, 2014-2018], and Rev. Shelley Miller [Transitional Minister, 2022-2024] have been volunteer readers.

In preparation for their Christmas program with their families, the children of St. Daniel's Preschool have a tradition of stopping in at the Danny's Diamonds / PEP Club Christmas party to present a few songs. Some field trips have included going to Duncan's to see farm animals, Dutch Way to learn about various store activities, Middle Creek nature preserve, and Preston's Orchard. An Open House and children's art show is held in the Spring, and the school year ends with a Closing Program.

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In an interview for St. Daniel's 250th anniversary in 2001, Sam Thomas noted, "While there has been no exact record of Preschool families who became members of St. Daniel's, I recall that at one installation service for new members, 5 of the 9 families had children in our Preschool. Rev. Ronald Weir [Pastor, 1989-1994] used a list of families who were not affiliated with any church, and he invited them to our church. The families joining could be attributed to a combination of factors, but the Preschool certainly had some influence in the growth of new members with young children."

For nearly four decades, St. Daniel's Preschool has been a wonderful expression of our congregation's mission of providing care, nurturing faith, and sharing hope. It has opened our doors to generations of children and families, provided a welcoming connection to our church, and allowed St. Daniel's to share Christian love and care with our community. While its impact can be measured in students taught and, perhaps, members welcomed into our congregation, its greatest blessings may be found in the less tangible but far-

reaching ways it has touched lives – supporting children’s social and academic development, nurturing their well-being, and strengthening parenting skills and family dynamics along the way.

For more information about St. Daniel’s Preschool, contact the church office, email Preschool Administrator Lorelei Lewis at [st.daniels.preschool@gmail.com](mailto:st.daniels.preschool@gmail.com) or visit our website.

What an amazing and enduring history we share!

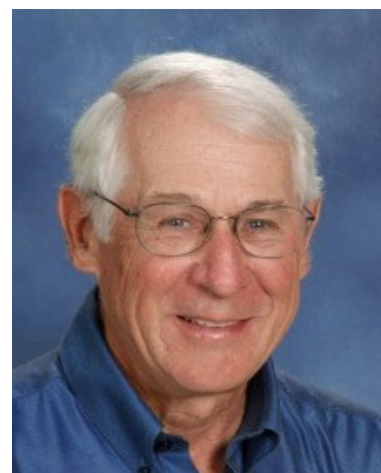
Follow this space throughout the year for snippets of St. Daniel's history from 1751 to 2026.

Historical details taken from the 'St. Daniel's Evangelical Lutheran Church "Eck Kirche" 1751-2001' church history book written by the St. Daniel's History Committee in celebration of the 250th anniversary. More details regarding this topic are found in Chapter 5 – Christian Service – St. Daniel’s Preschool. Additional details from Church Records and Annual Reports from the applicable years. Thanks to Sam Thomas and Lorelei Lewis for providing personal input and helpful background information. Photos from St. Daniel’s archives or as noted.

**#StDaniels #StDanielsLutheranChurch #EckKirche #CornerChurch  
#OnTheHillOverlookingRobesonia #RobesoniaPA #1751StDaniels2026 #275thAnniversary  
#HolyHighlights #History #OurHistory #StDanielsPreschool #Preschool  
#ReverendEdwardCloughen #ReverendRonaldWeir #FallFest #SamuelThomas #LoreleiLewis  
#JanMiller #ChurchRecord #AnnualReports #ALotHappensIn275Years**



Preschool staff – 2000:  
Nancy Buttimer, Donna Boyer, Linda Baum



Sam Thomas, President –  
Preschool Board of Directors

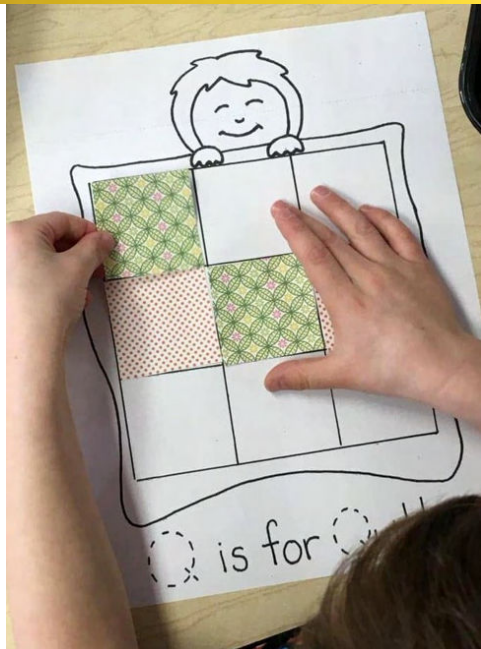
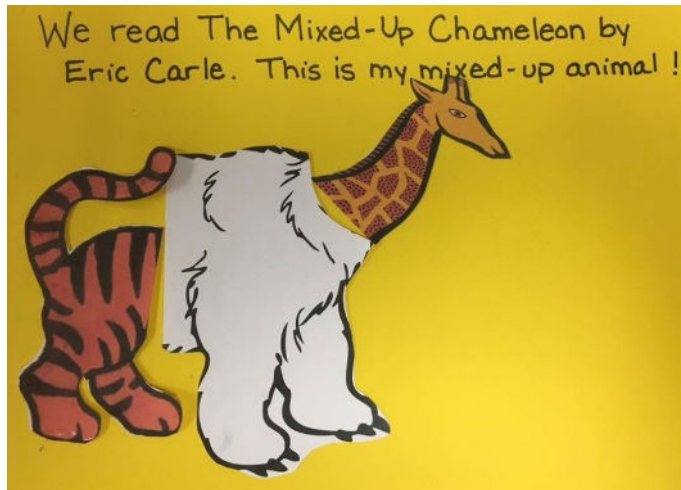


Above: Preschool classes – 2000/2001: Donna Boyer & Linda Baum, Lee Ann Raess & Linda Baum

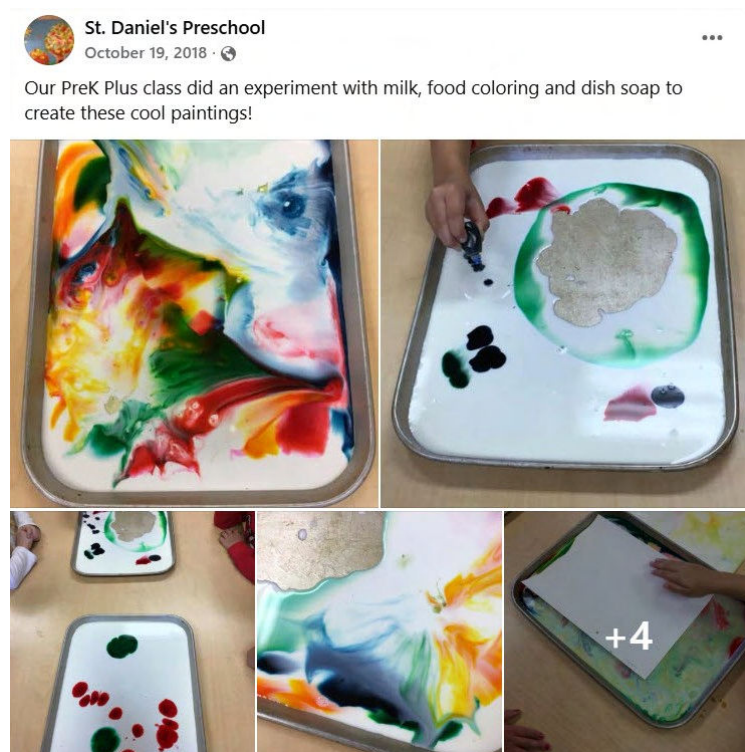


Above: St. Daniel's Preschool float in the Jack Frost Parade, circa 2018

## Some activities!



Q is for Quilt



Growing grass



Classrooms and  
Art, Reading,  
Math & Science,  
and Play Areas





Preschool  
decorations  
and  
activities





Visiting  
Duncan's farm



Taking a walk at  
Middle Creek

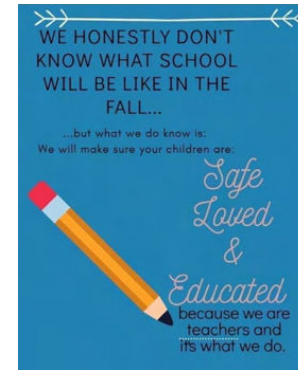


Learning about  
different  
departments at  
Dutch Way store  
(this is cake  
decorating!)





Preschool Teacher  
Jan Miller  
and  
Preschool Teacher &  
Administrator Lorelei  
Lewis



The COVID-19 pandemic  
did not stop our teachers  
from continuing their  
mission!



St. Daniel's 275th Anniversary Service – August 16, 2026 – “Blessing the Journey Ahead”

Jane Coombs and Joy Kline honoring

Robin Gordon, Jan Miller, Jenny Plassio, Lorelei Lewis, Sam & Bonnie Thomas, Susie Zerbe, Charlie & Jim Griesemer

Photo by Kim Henning