

Interfaith generosity | Facilities will be used free of charge.

Tree of Life to hold High Holiday services at Calvary Episcopal

In the heart of Mr. Rogers real life neighborhood, church exemplifies what it means to be a good neighbor.

By Toby Tabachnick

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Mr. Rogers would be *kvelling*.

The Calvary Episcopal Church, a paragon of good neighborliness, will serve as host to Tree of Life*Or L'Simcha Congregation for all of its 5780 High Holiday services.

Calvary is located on Shady Avenue, less than a mile from the Tree of Life synagogue building, in the heart of Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. On Saturday, Oct. 27, the church happened to be filled with parishioners attending its annual fundraiser to help the underserved. The news of the



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mass shooting targeting people down the street hit them hard, said the Rev. Jonathon Jensen, rector.

“So, right afterward, the next day, I preached about the shooting and what that might mean, short-term and long-term, and how does a person of faith respond,” Jensen said.

“In my experience, I have found that often what happens is people will say, ‘Is there anything we can do to help you?’ and it puts the burden on the person who’s hurt,” he said. “I’ve found it is much more helpful to make specific offers of things people might actually need, so the burden is on you to do it rather than the person who is hurting to think of something for you to do.”

Jensen recently had been counseling a parishioner on this topic, and “I thought this is just a bigger and more awful situation,” he said.

Calvary decided to make a specific offer to TOL*OLS. In a card signed by members of the church, they offered to “share space with you for anything you need because you won’t likely have yours for a while,” Jensen said. They sent the card along with money collected over the next two weeks to TOL*OLS.

Jensen knew it was unlikely that the grieving congregation would read the card immediately because of the sheer volume of mail it would be receiving, as well as being forced to address countless other necessary and more pressing tasks in the aftermath of the attack.

“I didn’t hear a thing for months, and then one day I got an email that said, ‘Hey I’m from Tree, and we’d like to talk to you about possibly using space for High Holidays,’” said Jensen.

Several congregants from TOL*OLS then came over to Calvary to meet with Jensen, look at the space, check dates, and discuss details such as “what practical things do you need, the number of people, parking, food, bathrooms, accessibility and so on,” he said.

Since the mass shooting, TOL*OLS has been holding Shabbat services in Levy Hall at Rodef Shalom Congregation, but needed to find a different location for the High Holidays, for which they are expecting at least 800 people. A committee was formed of TOL*OLS members to find an appropriate space.

It wasn’t so easy.

“We looked at a number of spaces,” and called others, said Alan Hausman, TOL*OLS vice president, and chair of the committee.

The committee inquired about using the Pittsburgh Playhouse in Oakland, which was Tree of Life’s building until 1952 when it moved to the corner of Wilkins and Shady avenues. The Playhouse, which was demolished just last week after being vacant for a year, was too small, according to Audrey Glickman, a member of TOL*OLS, who was present at a meeting in which possible locations were being discussed.

“That was a delightful thing,” she said. “We were too big for our old building.”

The committee also considered the vacant Macy’s department store at the Waterfront, but there were issues concerning getting enough chairs into the building and restroom accessibility, according to Michael Eisenberg, immediate past president of TOL*OLS.

Calvary, with its ample parking, great location and a sanctuary that seats 1,000 seems to be an ideal solution.

“It’s a beautiful facility,” said Hausman. “It’s magnificent. And their people have been phenomenal.”

TOL*OLS will be taking its machzors, Torahs, an ark and its shulchan to Calvary, according to Barb Feige, executive director of TOL*OLS. “And they are giving us other rooms for child care and youth services,” she added.

Jensen is focused on providing an environment of hospitality and comfort to TOL*OLS. Calvary is not asking for any rental or use fee, but is opening its doors to the congregation free of charge.

“It’s the right thing to do, to offer space to our neighbors,” Jensen said. “And people would do that for us, I am convinced.”

He will be meeting with Rabbi Jeffrey Myers soon to finalize details, such as where the congregation can store its prayer books between services.

Jensen is sensitive to the fact that there are Christian symbols throughout the church, and he is doing what he can to have them concealed for the High Holidays.

“There are some large stained-glass windows of Jesus, and there is no way around that,” he said. But he is planning on placing silk veils over two large Jesus on the cross sculptures that are installed in prominent places in the church.

“We want them to feel at home so it is theirs too,” said Jensen, who added that he plans to offer the church to TOL*OLS next year as well.

“I am going to offer to Rabbi Myers that next year the offer will stand for you to come back and have High Holy Days,” he said. “I don’t know what you are doing with your building yet, maybe you will be ready a year from now, but if you are not, please know that you are welcome to come back to Calvary and do the same thing. And by then, we will be good at it and have experience with it.” Hausman said TOL*OLS will be doing security assessments of Calvary to ensure that the space will be properly protected.

While non-members of the congregation will be welcome to attend services, they will be required to make arrangements in advance.

“We will be making sure that we will let people know that it will be ticket-only,” said Sam Schachner, president of TOL*OLS. “Anybody that wishes to visit or join us will be asked to do so in advance for obvious

security reasons. There are so many throughout the community who have been tremendously supportive that if somebody wants to join us we would feel honored if that occurs. And we are also OK if it is just us.”

Schachner has “tremendous appreciation for all of the support from throughout the community and especially from Calvary Episcopal,” he said. “It’s really a sense of respecting and collaborating in the diversified environment that makes it that much more special and has given us so much throughout the process. They have been amazingly generous.”

Being allowed to use Calvary also provides a means to “really forge ahead in terms of having our own place to do a special service, which this will be, so it stands out as something that really gives us broader space and allows us to do everything we want to do for the High Holidays in terms of coming together as our own community,” he added.

The arrangement with TOL*OLS is a gift to Calvary as well, said Jensen.

“Thoughts and prayer are powerful,” the rector said in his sermon the day after the massacre, he recalled. “Prayer and action from enough people who work for good can stop a bullet.”

“This event of sharing space is putting prayer into action,” he said.

Toby Tabachnick can be reached at
ttabachnick@pittsburghjewishchronicle.org.