

A Passion for Pets

Animal Lovers at Oak Ridge, Tennessee Church Hold Annual Blessing of Pets

By Stanley E. Long

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church of Oak Ridge, Tennessee holds an annual Pet Fest and Blessing every October, serving pet owners and pets in their extended community. It is a family affair with a festive spirit, offering worship, education, services, and fun for pet lovers of all ages.



The first Pet Blessing in 2001 was a small ceremony attended by a few Grace members and their pets. As the Pet Blessing became popular, some members recognized a need for education in obtaining and caring for a family pet. As interest increased, more activities were added, and adjoining Woodland Elementary School became a partner. Over a fourteen-year period, it became a community event that features some 30 information booths staffed by animal rescue and adoption groups, humane societies and veterinary services. Up to 400 people (and 300 animals, from llamas to ferrets) may attend, and it takes some 60 church members to make this ministry-festival happen, with planning and coordination starting in early June.

Activities start about 1:00 PM. Imagine a sunny Saturday afternoon, falling leaves, muffled sounds of bluegrass and gospel music, and a church parking lot and school playground taking on a carnival-like atmosphere. There is an information center for participants to register for photos, door prizes and contests. A schedule of activities as well as a map showing activity locations is available.

Origin of Pet Blessing

The custom of pet blessing is generally traced to Saint Francis of Assisi, who advocated that all animals, as part of God's creation, share in the fortunes of human existence. Since the bond between a person and a pet is a unique relationship, truly a gift from the Creator, it is fitting for us to pray for the wellbeing of our pets as we do ourselves.



Pet-owner portraits are free and prints are mailed to owners following the festival.

One year a balloon-toting clown and McGruff the Crime Dog mingled with visitors, while a talented trio of Shitzus “sang” *Jesus Loves Me*. A giant “Dalmation” has also been seen. On the grassy athletic field behind the school, a border collie demonstrates its skill navigating an obstacle course. Face painting and horse drawn carriage rides keep kids entertained. Volunteer photographers take portraits of family members with their pets. Visitors enjoy llamas and the many different breeds of dogs and cats displayed by rescue and adoption agencies. There’s even a (canine) kissing booth, in case you haven’t had enough affection from a dog lately.

Seminars on subjects such as grieving the loss of a family pet, or the treatment of dog bites, are often featured. Some bring their dogs for an identification microchip



A giant “Dalmation” greets visitors.



A family pet is given special attention by Pastor Steve Damos during a recent Pet Blessing.

implant, provided with assistance from a university veterinary school. Others visit the benefit bake sale and munch on homemade baked goods while a musical group entertains in the pavilion.

The walls of the Fellowship Hall become an art museum displaying colorful pictures hand-drawn by Woodland School student-artists.

The ceremonial Pet Blessing begins at 4:00 P.M. with an invocation and opening prayers, followed by responsive readings and songs, including St. Francis' Prayer for Animals. Pastor's introduction explains, *"It is without hesitation that we ask God's blessing on our pets that have brought us so much love, joy, comfort, and companionship."* The Pastor and assistants chat with each pet owner before laying

hands on the animal (or on its cage) and pronouncing a blessing.

At the end of the day, several homeless animals are adopted, and contacts are made among animal rescue and adoption agencies, the local humane society, and prospective pet owners. Information on spaying and neutering is distributed, and ID microchips are implanted in 20 to 30 dogs, making their identification easier if lost.

Grace's Pet Fest and Blessing serves the community of pet owners through spiritual nourishment, education, and wholesome family entertainment.



A St. Bernard dropped off at a rescue booth was given a chance for a new home.

Proceeds from bake sales are used to support selected animal rescue groups. In the weeks following, pet portraits will be mailed to registered participants, along with pet blessing certificates. Through its annual Pet Fest and Blessing, the pet friendly congregation of Grace Lutheran Church is accomplishing its goal to provide a ministry for “all God’s creation.”



In 2014, members of the Shelter Road band provided music in the pavilion.