

DIAKON

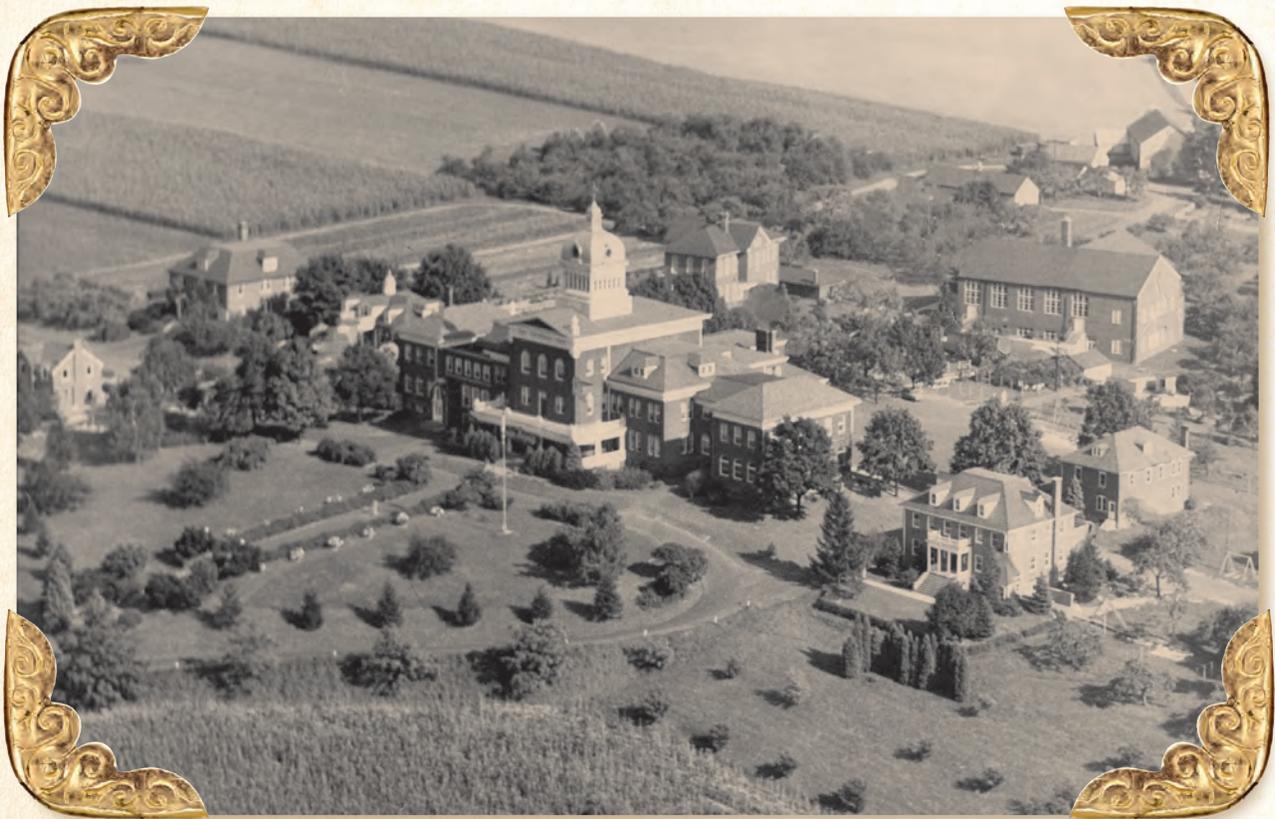
A LOOK BACK

Celebrating 150 Years of  
Caring for Our Neighbors



150  
YEARS

DIAKON  
MANY HANDS. ONE HEART.



*Above, top: The campus of the Tressler Lutheran Home for Children, Loysville, Pennsylvania (initially known as the Tressler Orphans Home); above, bottom: the campus of The Lutheran Home at Topton, Pennsylvania (initially known as the Lutheran Orphans Home, Topton). On the cover: The Tressler Orphans Home Boys Band, circa 1932; Sallie E. and Clair E. Carl, the first orphans served by the Lutheran Orphans Home, Topton.*

# A Look Back

## The Many Histories of Diakon

*Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries and Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries trace their origins to the 2000 affiliation and 2006 merger of Tressler Lutheran Services and Lutheran Services Northeast, whose storied histories date to the mid-19th century.*

## Tressler

### *The Tressler Lutheran Home for Children*

**Diakon's history** began in 1868, when the court in Perry County, Pennsylvania, granted a charter for the Tressler Orphans Home.

Yet those beginnings can be traced back another 20 years.

Concerned about education for children, John and Elizabeth Loy Tressler in 1848 established a "classical academy" on their farm, later relocating the program to the basement of a local Lutheran congregation. In the mid-1850s, John, plus several of his sons and two or three employees, began constructing a three-story school and boarding building on the Tressler property, to expand and enhance the academy.

The building would eventually be known as the Tressler Orphans Home's Old Main.

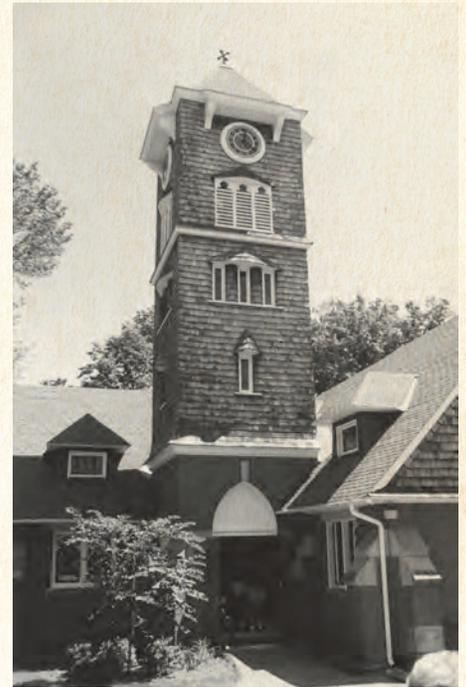
The academy provided education to children until 1865, when it was transformed into one of the first homes and schools in the nation for boys and girls whose fathers had died in the Civil War. It was headed by John Tressler's son, Capt. David Loy Tressler.

A year later, the Rev. Philip Willard, who had earlier served as a local pastor, traveled to Loysville with the idea of transforming the home into a church institution.

In October 1867, delegates from the East, West, Central Pennsylvania and Allegheny synods of the church petitioned the court for a charter for the organization, to be known as the "Tressler Orphans Home of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the United States of America."

The charter was granted Jan. 6, 1868, and the grounds and building purchased a month later for \$5,000. Capt. David Tressler donated his share of the proceeds; in appreciation, the institution was named the Tressler Orphans Home. Within as few as 20 years, the home was serving 150 children, though its population would later grow as large as 331 in the 1930s.

After a year on the road raising more than \$4,000 for the home's operation, Willard returned to assume his duties as superintendent. He served as "Father Willard" for the next 21 years, during which an extensive building program took place as well as the acquisition of additional land.



*The Children's Memorial Chapel at the Tressler Orphans Home.*



*Boys at the Tressler Orphans Home.*

Expansion continued during the next half-century or so, with such buildings as an infirmary, dining hall, dormitories, nursery, bakery, steam laundry, various industrial school facilities (including a printing plant) and, dedicated in 1900, a children's memorial chapel. The Annie Lowry Memorial Hospital was erected in 1909, the result of a gift provided through Lowry's executor, Elwood Bonsall, Esq., of Philadelphia; interestingly, a similarly named building was constructed on the campus of The Lutheran Home at Tipton, also the result of a gift from that estate.

Lutheran synods assisted in funding construction of various residence halls, with the buildings bearing such names as the Pittsburgh Synodical Dormitory. "Tresslertown" developed such innovations as a banking system for children in residence, an onsite fire department and extensive vocational programs including the Tresslertown Press, which provided envelopes for congregations across the country.

The home, which grew to hundreds of acres and whose annual budget in the mid-1900s ran about \$50,000, also had its own farming operation. "The yield of wheat," one history notes, in one year "was 1,220 bushels; of corn, after filling two 100-ton silos, 4,225 bushels, and of other crops accordingly. Forty fat hogs were butchered and twenty-two large steers fed and marketed."

In addition, the home had numerous activities for the



*Children served by the Tressler Orphans Home, 1929.*

children including a student government, an orchestra for girls and the Tressler Boys Band, known for annual fundraising tours in Pennsylvania and surrounding states.

By the late 1940s, the home's population had declined to 119 children, the result of changes in child-welfare approaches. Within a few years, Tressler had implemented programs directed at children and youths living with their family.

In 1962, as the number of children in residence continued to decrease, the Tressler board suspended operations of the home and, a year later, sold the buildings and grounds to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which today maintains a Youth Development Center on the site.

During the next decade, the Tressler organization began adoption services, operated a group foster home and placed child-focused social workers in various locations, often in concert with other Lutheran organizations.

Eventually known as **Tressler Lutheran Children and Family Services**, the organization in 1970 began working cooperatively with **Lutheran Social Services – Central Penn Region**, a step that led to the 1972 creation of **Tressler Lutheran Services**—one of the two organizations that created **Diakon**.

In 1988, Tressler Lutheran Children and Family Services became the **Tressler Lutheran Fund**, a supporting organization for children's and family services, a step very much in alignment with its roots.

Today, that organization is known as the **Diakon Lutheran Fund**.

## *Lutheran Social Services – Central Penn Region*

**Lutheran Social Services – Central Penn Region** was one of several regional Lutheran social ministry organizations that eventually arose as a result of the 1938 creation of the former Central Pennsylvania Synod of the Lutheran church.

By 1950, Lutherans in the Harrisburg area, interested in helping older adults, developed Lutheran Social Services of Greater Harrisburg. Two years later, they opened the Lutheran Home at Harrisburg.

A 1953 realignment of the synod’s territory created regions that would become the basic unit for social services; one of the “inner mission societies” that developed represented the Susquehanna Region near Williamsport. Among its programs were adoption services—representing one of Diakon’s first efforts in this field—chaplaincy for various local homes for older adults, homemaker services and social action, with a focus on creating new community-based programs.

The Harrisburg society opened the Lutheran Home of the West Shore in Camp Hill in 1957, following that event four years later with the dedication of the Lutheran Home of Upper Dauphin in Millersburg; the society also had hired a caseworker to serve families in need.

Both Lutheran Social Services – Central Region—the new name for the Harrisburg society—and its counterpart in Williamsport, LSS – Susquehanna Region, continued to develop services to meet community need, particularly during the turbulent 1960s. Among them were pastoral training on crisis intervention and family life conferences.



*The Harrisburg Lutheran Home.*

In 1968, the two organizations—serving a total of 14 central Pennsylvania counties—consolidated to form Lutheran Social Services – Central Penn Region. Services included counseling, a homemaker service, family life educational services and hospital consultation on social work. The new organization also helped to organize community-based meals-on-wheels programs and the George Frey Center for Children, Middletown.

Two years later, LSS – Central Penn Region began working cooperatively with Tressler, leading to the 1972 creation of Tressler Lutheran Services.

## *Tressler Lutheran Services*

**Originally called** Tressler-Lutheran Service Associates, **Tressler Lutheran Services** represented a unique creation for its time. It was the “operating agency” for its two “parent” organizations, LSS – Central Penn Region and Tressler Lutheran Children and Family Services. Executive committees of the parent boards constituted the Tressler Lutheran Services board of directors.

The “association” eliminated duplicated services and support, but was primarily an effort to reach more people than either organization alone could aid.

And the effort was successful. Tressler Lutheran Services grew quickly.

In addition to its existing services, Tressler added refugee

programs, opened counseling centers, expanded its then-separate foster care and adoption services and, on a mountainous tract near Boiling Springs, opened what is today the Diakon Wilderness Center, launching the youth services center with residential programming and wilderness challenge-based journeys, both of which eventually evolved into different approaches based on community need.

In 1978, Tressler managed statewide social services focused on resettling refugees from various regions of the world.

Tressler also dramatically expanded the number of senior living communities it operated. In 1972, the organization operated two small retirement homes in Camp Hill and Millersburg; within only four years, it had closed those two older homes and opened five new ones, eventually operating 10.

Part of this expansion occurred because of unique partnerships with county governments to bring nursing care services to rural regions, an additional example of the organization's leading-edge approach to service.

In January 2000, Tressler Lutheran Services affiliated with Lutheran Services Northeast to create **Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries**.

## *Tressler Lutheran Services of Maryland*

**Tressler Lutheran Children**



*Sister Zora, center, with young women served by the hospice operated by the Lutheran Inner Mission Society of the Baltimore region.*

**and Family Services** had historically had a presence in Maryland, funding a child-focused social worker with **Lutheran Social Services of Maryland** in the 1960s. Of course, the Tressler home itself had served many children from Maryland.

LSS of Maryland was founded in 1913 as “The Inner Mission Society of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Baltimore and Vicinity” and initially offered such services as visitation of people in hospitals, orphanages and prisons. Soon after its founding, the organization developed a home (then known as a hospice) for single women living in Baltimore.

Over the years, the organization expanded to include employment-related training, counseling, information and referral services, a “handyman” program, housing services and in-home care.

In the 1960s, in fact, LSS of Maryland achieved recognition for leading the nation with the first institutional meals-on-wheels program, as well as the first “mobility system” providing escorted transportation for older adults and the physically challenged.

To streamline operations, LSS of Maryland merged with Tressler Lutheran Services in the 1990s. Not only was Tressler by then operating a children’s day-care center in Baltimore, but it also was providing adoption services across much of the state and had established senior living communities and adult day services in western Maryland.

# Topton

## *The Lutheran Home at Topton*

**Lutherans who had gathered** in convention in 1894 at St. John Lutheran Church in Boyertown, Pennsylvania, asked the same type of question that had prompted the earlier development of the Tressler home: “What can be done on behalf of the orphans of our congregations or Sunday schools being deprived of their homes and means of a Christian education?”

Congregations throughout the region quickly took action and a 105-acre farm was purchased for \$7,000 in October 1896 in the Borough of Topton to serve as the site for “The Lutheran Orphans’ Home in Berks County, Pennsylvania.” A charter for the institution that would eventually be known as The Lutheran Home at Topton was granted in December.

The Rev. Uriah P. Heilman was named superintendent the following year, with the first two orphans arriving in May. The children’s parents, of nearby Kutztown, had died of typhoid fever.

Construction of the home’s iconic Old Main building began that same year. Heilman himself broke the first ground for Old Main, digging out sufficient earth to create the shape of a cross. He knelt in the opening, offering prayer.

Like the Tressler home, The Lutheran Home at Topton grew quickly, with expansion occurring through additions to Old Main as well as construction of other buildings. Two two-story wings containing schoolrooms, bedrooms and a chapel were added to Old Main in 1911. An infirmary, underwritten by the estate of Annie Lowry (*see the Tressler history above*), was built that same year.

Eventually, additional buildings were constructed, some funded by Lutheran church conferences; these served as residences for specific groups of children, as chapel and gymnasium/auditorium or as schoolhouse; as at the Tressler home, students would later attend local public schools.



Children under the age of 3 were able to live at the Lutheran Orphans Home, Topton, following construction of the George E. Holton Memorial Cottage, shown in back.

Initially, children under the age of three were not admitted, but the Topton board realized the need to care for younger children; the George E. Holton Memorial Cottage for Infants was dedicated in 1916.

The Rev. Dr. John Raker—who would go on to found the Good Shepherd Home in Allentown, Pennsylvania—served as superintendent from 1901 to 1907. Although he inherited \$50,000 of debt, the home was debt-free by 1904 and by the end of his tenure, Raker had raised \$5,000 for his vision of an “old folks home” at Topton.

That vision did not become reality until 1940, when the Annie Lowry building was converted into a home for older adults, yet the step nevertheless can be counted among the earliest initiatives in modern senior living services.

Additional senior living accommodations would open during the next few decades, including the then-leading edge concept of cottage homes—known as Luther Haven—and Caum Memorial Home in Reading, offering personal care. The no-longer-used school building was converted into the Topton campus’ first nursing care center.

Named superintendent in 1909, the Rev. Dr. Jonas O. Henry reportedly came to his new role partly as a result of a ride the local pastor offered to a student walking up the hill to the home. As she disembarked from his buggy, she turned and asked: “Won’t you come up and be our Daddy?” Henry and his wife, Ida, who served



Girls at The Lutheran Orphans Home, Topton clean green and wax beans for the day's meal. Both orphanages had farm operations to help feed the children they served.

as matron, stayed 36 years.

During those years, Mrs. Henry created the Topton Putz—the name derives from the German verb “putzen,” which means to brighten or display—a more than 550-square-foot collection of holiday displays, including working trains. Scenes include the nativity, a replica of Radio City Music Hall complete with an organ and an orchestra in the pit, a circus, Toonerville trolley and a large church complete with tiny hymnals, baptismal font and a pipe organ. The Putz still attracts visitors today.

Like the Tressler home, changes in society affected Topton's population. By the early 1960s, in fact, the number of children at Topton was dwarfed by that of the older adults living at the home. As a result of these changes, Topton began to explore other ways to serve children and youths. Recognizing these changing needs, the home, in fact, had hired a fulltime caseworker as early as 1951 and employed house-parents to create a more family-like atmosphere.

Eventually, this new direction included foster care, adoption services, pregnancy services, group homes, in-home services and family life counseling. Community-based programs encompassed home health services, senior centers and volunteer-focused home care and transportation services.

In addition, The Lutheran Home at Topton expanded senior living services through construction of new buildings on the campus, establishment of rental-assistance housing, and development of Continuing Care Retirement Communities in other locations, including Luther Crest in Allentown, Pennsylvania, today one of Diakon's largest senior living communities.

In 1997, The Lutheran Home at Topton affiliated with LWS of Northeastern Pennsylvania, creating **Lutheran Services Northeast**.

## *Home for Widows, Lutheran Inner Mission Society and LCFS*

**The Lutheran Home at Topton**, like Tressler, would carry on ministries begun by other organizations. One of those, in fact, predates The Lutheran Home at Topton.

**The Home for Widows and Single Women**, Reading, Pennsylvania, was incorporated by the Berks County Orphans' Court on June 5, 1876. Similar to other regional organizations—some of which carried the unappealing name of “home for the friendless”—the home offered a residence for older women with limited resources.

As changing times in the mid-1970s reduced the need for such homes, the organization merged with The Lutheran Home at Topton; its few remaining residents were relocated to the Caum personal care home in Reading.

*(A longtime member of the board of managers of The Home for Widows and Single Women was Mrs. Helen N. Palmer, whose later bequest would allow Diakon in 2017 to refurbish Old Main at Topton and create the Helen Palmer Center for Permanency for Diakon Adoption & Foster Care.)*

**The Lutheran Inner Mission Society of Reading and Berks**, founded in 1921, focused on hospital visitations and similar institutions such as the Wernersville State Hospital and county prison, as well as relief and casework among Lutheran families and employment-related services.

Like the Baltimore inner mission that is part of the Tressler history, the Berks program included the Lutheran Hospice for Girls, established in 1928. In addition to its extensive hospital visitation program, the inner mission society in 1920 cooperatively established a deaf congregation with Trinity Lutheran Church in Reading. In 1984, Trinity, in conjunction with the society, expanded the deaf ministry by calling a Lutheran pastor fluent in American Sign Language to a part-time position.

Later expanded to include Schuylkill County, the inner mission society and The Lutheran Home at Topton merged the end of 1991.

In 2016, Diakon assumed operation of two programs—family reunification and preservation services—begun by **Lutheran Children and Family Service of Eastern Pennsylvania**, which had made the difficult decision to end its children- and family-focused services.

Interestingly, this was not the first time such a transfer occurred. In 1968, because of a synodical restructuring, The Lutheran Home at Topton inherited three offices in the then-new Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, as well as a home for single mothers in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, that had been operated by the Philadelphia-based LCFS.

### ***LWS of Northeastern Pennsylvania***

**Founded in 1956** in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, Lutheran Wel-

fare Service of Northeastern Pennsylvania arose in similar fashion to The Lutheran Home at Topton's origin. Representatives of 36 regional congregations met to establish a new organization, although in this case the residential program was for older adults rather than children.

While LWS's initial facility served only six residents, a former hotel in downtown Hazleton was eventually purchased and converted into a skilled nursing and residential facility known as the Home for the Aging. In 1974, LWS purchased a local "convalescent center," establishing what would be known as The Manor at Saint Luke Village. A second skilled care facility was later added to the site, as were senior living homes.

Among other LWS services was Hospice Saint John, one of the first organized hospices in Pennsylvania; its services are continued by SpiriTrust Lutheran Hospice & Home Care, the result of a later partnership effort between Diakon and SpiriTrust Lutheran of York, Pennsylvania.

In 1997, LWS affiliated with The Lutheran Home at Topton to form **Lutheran Services Northeast**.

### ***Lutheran Services Northeast***

**Lutheran Services Northeast** has a relatively brief history, having been created by the 1997 affiliation of The Lutheran Home at Topton and LWS of Northeastern Pennsylvania, and then several years later entering into a similar affiliation with Tressler Lutheran Services to create Diakon.

Nevertheless, those three years were busy ones. Immediately after its creation in 1997, LSN began a partnership with the Visiting Nurses Association of the Lehigh Valley, fashioning Visiting Nurse Northeast. Because of changes in health care, VNN later became part of a local hospital-based health-care system.



*One of four rental-assistance housing complexes now operated by Diakon, Lutherwood was constructed by LWS of Northeastern Pennsylvania. The three other HUD-funded communities are located on The Lutheran Home at Topton campus and in Frostburg, Maryland.*

In June of the following year, LSN acquired a long-term nursing and personal care center in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Other efforts between then and 2000 included the opening or acquisition of two additional personal care communities and expansion of counseling services, the Hospice Saint John program and existing senior living communities.

In January 2000, Lutheran Services Northeast affiliated with Tressler Lutheran Services to create **Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries**.



*Manatawny Manor, Pottstown, Pennsylvania, was one of several senior care communities opened or expanded by Lutheran Services Northeast.*



*Children sledding at The Lutheran Orphans Home at Topton.*



*Young children saying their prayers at The Lutheran Orphans Home, Topton.*



*The swimming pool at the Tressler Orphans Home; both orphanages had swimming areas for the children living at the homes.*

To see more photos from Diakon's past, visit [www.diakon.org/150](http://www.diakon.org/150).

# DIAKON

The history of Diakon is still being written.

But if there is one phrase to capture the organization's path since the 2000 affiliation that created Diakon, it would be "change and growth," always with a focus on serving more people. A brief summary of significant steps in that continuing history includes:

✦ The separate incorporation of Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries, allowing the development of separate boards and emphases for Diakon's senior living services and programs for children and families.

✦ The mid-2000s sale of a number of Diakon senior living communities because of the high need for capital funding, but major expansion and renovation projects at the remaining communities as a result, creating regional market leaders in senior living services. This process also includes the purchase of an additional—and strategically located—Continuing Care Retirement Community, renovation of Diakon's rental-assistance apartment buildings, significant expansion of care for people with cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer's disease and successful emphases on quality indicators, compliance and the national nursing-care "star" rating system.

✦ The receipt since 2000 of five-year contracts to manage and expand Pennsylvania's Statewide Adoption & Permanency Network, or SWAN.

✦ The continuing refinement or addition of programs—or, in a few cases, transfer to other providers—in response to community need. While the long-term residential program at the Diakon Wilderness Center, as just one example, ended as a result of changes in county referrals, the center launched an alternative-education day treatment program that has experienced significant demand for service and that, in 2014, received the Pennsylvania juvenile court judges' "community-based-program-of-the-year" award.

✦ Successful efforts, as a Lutheran Disaster Response partner, to several disasters including long-term efforts in Crisfield, Maryland, devastated by Super Storm Sandy in late 2012.

*The Diakon history continues to be written. To learn more, visit [www.diakon.org](http://www.diakon.org) and read our history and news sections.*



*Diakon's senior living initiatives included construction of a neighborhood-concept health care center at Buffalo Valley Lutheran Village, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.*



*The tower at the Diakon Wilderness Center helps at-risk youths learn to build teams and overcome challenges.*

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