

# The History of LCMS Mercy Work with African Americans<sup>1</sup> | *by Rev. Dr. Roosevelt Gray*

The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has an enduring legacy of using mercy work as a means by which to share the Gospel. This is true for the Synod's work with and among African Americans as well.

For instance, in *Der Lutheraner*, at one time the official German paper of the Missouri Synod, Rev. Dr. H. C. Schwan wrote an early word of appeal for the “Colored Mission”:

If you heartily wish all men what God has already given you in His dear Son, then think, when you come to the words, “Thy kingdom come,” in your next repetition of the Lord's Prayer, particularly and right heartily of the benighted negroes. Then see if there is not some coin in your pocketbook. Take it out and add it to that which other pious Christians give. Finally, take your pen and write to the Mission Board: Onward in God's name. Call laborers. Provide more room. Build a chapel. Here is a contribution. It shall not be the last, God willing. To Him the cause be committed. Amen.

Then, in 1869, Dr. C. F. W. Walther — the great leader of the Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States and one of the greatest theologians of his time — wrote a letter to the Rev. F. Sievers: “It will be difficult to begin mission work among the ‘colored people’ as long as we have not more men who are conversant with the English language.” The need was recognized, and both pastors and people stood ready to meet it.

## A Far-Reaching Convention

The sixth convention of the Synodical Conference was held at Emmanuel Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1877, with the Rev. W. S. Stubnatzy as pastor. For African Americans, this convention was of far-reaching significance.

Rev. Herman A. Preus, president of the Norwegian Lutheran Synod, submitted an important question: Had the time finally come for the Synodical Conference to direct its mission attention to work among the blacks and Indians of this country? The question was turned over to a committee, which reported favorably. Under the invocation of God and with great enthusiasm, the Conference unanimously resolved to begin and carry on a mission among the neglected and forsaken blacks of the land.

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<sup>1</sup>Author's note: The history of LCMS mercy work with African Americans is recorded in four books: *Illustrated Historical Sketch of Our Colored Mission* by the Rev. Nils J. Bakke (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1914); *Half a Century of Lutheranism Among our Colored People* by Christopher F. Drewes, Director of Missions, 1877–1927 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1927); *Light in the Dark Belt, The Story of Rosa Young as told by herself* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950); *Roses and Thorns—The Centennial Edition of Black Lutheran Mission and Ministry in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod* by Richard C. Dickinson (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977).

## Early Beginnings

This was the beginning of witness, mercy and life together for the LCMS among blacks in America. Under the Board of Commissioners, the Mission Board at the 1877 Synodical Conference issued a call to the Rev. J. F. Doescher. Rev. Doescher accepted the call as the first “Lutheran Negro Missionary” and was inducted into his office by Rev. F. J. Buenger, chairman of the Mission Board for Colored Mission. He began his missionary activity in the South, traveling, surveying and preaching to blacks.

This mission work had at its very foundation an emphasis on preaching the Gospel through the mercy ministry of educating blacks. The intent? Improving their neglected and forsaken condition after the Civil War and their emancipation. In most places in the South, blacks were relegated back to slave-like conditions under “Black Laws” that denied them their basic Constitutional rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Without access to education and jobs, many freedmen endured worse than slave-like conditions.

It was in this hurting environment that, in 1878, the first Lutheran Sunday School was organized in Little Rock, Arkansas. Rev. J. F. Doescher started this work in Fletcher’s Hall in the heart of the city, a place that did not have a good reputation. Doescher preached in a black church, visited the homes of a number of black people and held religious talks with them. He stopped black children on the street who knew nothing of the Savior. His work must have seemed limitless, since at that time Little Rock had a black population of 6000, and two-fifths were churchless.

By God’s grace, Doescher’s work in Little Rock was richly blessed. Supported by members of the white Lutheran church, Doescher announced the services in the papers and passed out 500 placards in the community. Parents asked him if he would teach the children as well. After a month, the Sunday school enrollment had climbed to more than forty. The attendance at services also increased.

Rev. F. Berg followed behind Doescher, beginning his work in Little Rock after Easter, 1878. In the following years, St. Paul Colored Lutheran Church was erected and then dedicated to the service of God for the blacks of Little Rock. Then, in the fall of 1879, the first black Lutheran parochial school was opened. Teacher E. W. J. Jeske, from the Teachers’ Seminary at Addison, Illinois, was placed in charge of the school that boasted 93 students in just four months. The congregation also grew to 23 baptized members in the midst of adverse and discouraging circumstances for blacks.

One of the great examples of the faithful black members in Little Rock was Mrs. Ellen Bransford, who joined St. Paul in 1880 and was baptized by Pastor Berg. She remained faithful to her Lutheran faith and church to her end. She passed away in 1914, and in her last will and testament she left all her earthly possessions to her dearly beloved Lutheran church. The legacy amount was \$11,096. Several months later, Leah Jones, a charter member of St. Paul passed and she too willed all she had — \$946.80 — to the church, giving half each to the white and black Lutheran churches.

Many pastors and teachers went on to serve St. Paul’s church and school, and over time many families came to faith in Christ through St. Paul Colored Congregation, even as many children were educated in St. Paul’s day school. While the church and school closed in 1895, the members continued to gather together in the home of Mrs. Emily Bosley, one of the members of St. Paul, where they read the Bible, recited the Catechism and sang Lutheran hymns. Rev. Poppe, pastor of the local German Lutheran

Church, would on occasion preach to them and administer the Lord's Supper. Then, upon the invitation from the white Lutheran English-speaking church, they attended services there, and for 38 years, St. Paul members remained faithful in the midst of many adverse and discouraging circumstances.

## Expanding further South

Rev. Doescher was encouraged to proceed with his work further south. Leaving Little Rock, he traveled through Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee, preaching in many cities and on many large plantations.

Rev. Doescher started mission work among blacks in New Orleans in 1878, in an infamous area of the city in a building called the "Sailors' Home." A once proud and handsome four-story brick structure, the building was destroyed by fire around 1897 after serving as a boarding-house, hospital and refuge for indigent sailors.

Rev. C. F. W. Sapper, pastor of Trinity in South St. Louis and first secretary elected for the Synodical Conference Mission Board, visited the building, noting:

The whole structure is a dark, spooky-looking ruin. The doors and windows are demolished: even some of the door and window frames have been torn out, and along with them went parts of the wall. Here and there the walls have fallen into the rooms, crashing through the floor and ceiling of the rooms below. The whole is a labyrinth of half-demolished rooms, halls and stairways, filled with filth and refuse, which afford hiding places for all kinds of vermin, homeless cats and dogs and the lowest riffraff, who wish to commit sin and shame, for the latter in particular, for the whole neighborhood is fearfully degraded. . . . In one of the wings of this horrible building our mission has its home.<sup>2</sup>

When asked why he selected so degraded a section of the city while other localities contained a much better class of blacks, Doescher replied, "I feel convinced that this neighborhood will furnish the poor and maimed and the halt and the blind for God's feast." Out of this site, Mount Zion Evangelical Lutheran Mission Hall was established.

Once again, Doescher immediately started mercy mission work by creating a Christian day school in the "Sailors' Home." The school, which started with 26 students, saw 120 in attendance by the end of the year.

A Sunday school was also opened on April 7, 1878, with 36 pupils. The enrollment grew by God's grace, and by May, 1878, the enrollment was 156; 35 were adults. Mount Zion grew into a well-established congregation, planted from that mercy mission endeavor, and today it is the oldest continuously operating black LCMS congregation.

Doescher didn't stop there. In Little Rock and New Orleans and at all the other places that he visited, missionary Doescher found promising fields. His sympathetic heart was moved with pity as he saw the poor groping in the darkness of ignorance, superstition and sin. Going from place to place, he preached two or more times during a single day. It was a most strenuous task as he traveled between three and four thousand miles.

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<sup>2</sup>Drewes, Christopher F. *Half a Century of Lutheranism Among our Colored People*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1927.

Missionary Doescher's travels included Moss Point, Mississippi; Mobile, Alabama; Pensacola and Milton, Florida; Montgomery, Alabama; Eufaula, Alabama; Chattahoochee, Florida; Quincy, Florida; Tallahassee, Florida and Monticello and Waukeenah, Florida, where he was obliged to spend a night with black families because he could secure no lodging with whites. He went on to Thomasville and Atlanta, Georgia; Chattanooga and Nashville, Tennessee and Altenburg, Missouri. From Altenburg he traveled via St. Louis to Fort Wayne to see his family and to report to the Synodical Conference. His report was that the mission and mercy opportunities were many and his report created great interest.

Missionary Doescher accepted a call to St. John's Church in New Orleans and later the Mission Board issued a call to Rev. Nils. J. Bakke, said to be the greatest white Lutheran missionary for black ministry in the LCMS. Rev. Doescher installed Rev. N. J. Bakke as the new missionary and as his successor.

Rev. N. J. Bakke started his work in New Orleans by serving as pastor of Mount Zion and St. Paul while Teacher Charles Berg served as head teacher at St. Paul. Berg treated his students with kindness and love, and in return, the students loved and held him in high esteem and brought their parents and other relatives to church. Out of the mission work, a new congregation was organized. The first members and founders of St. Paul's congregation were children educated in the school. Berg died on March 9, 1888, and student F. J. Lankenau took charge of St. Paul's school till the end of the term. Yet in the midst of many obstacles and challenges, Mount Zion and St. Paul grew through day school education and the Gospel. On August 10, 1891, Rev. Bakke followed the instructions of the Mission Board and left for the new mission field in North Carolina, going by way of St. Louis to Concord, North Carolina. When he left, Mount Zion had about 240 baptized members and St. Paul's had about 136. Two other congregations were started in New Orleans: Bethlehem was started by Rev. August Burgdorf in 1887, and Trinity began in 1912, by Rev. Ed H. Schmidt, pastor of St. Paul's.

Each new mission start was connected with a school to aid the people by providing opportunities for them to move upward from poverty. Many of the children sat at the feet of educators like teachers Eugene R. Vix and D. Meibohm, educators of genial disposition with a great interest in the mercy work of educating blacks and a healthy care for their conditions. Rev. Lankenau wrote concerning Vix and Meibohm, "The writer feels that never was another pastor favored with two such teachers as he had in Teachers Vix and Meibohm. In every perplexity he knew that he could go to them for council and advice, and when disheartening experience brought his youthful courage to low ebb, these veterans of the Lord were ever ready to cheer him up."

The modest Teacher Meibohm once noted, "One day a well-dressed black lady came into the schoolyard and asked me whether I was Teacher Meibohm. When I told her that I was the person she was looking for, she said: 'I come from Defiance, and my sister-in-law, Clara B., who in former years attended your school, asked me to come and bring you greetings. She told me that she never would have learned to know her Savior if she had not attended your School.'"

Pastors came and went but Teachers Vix and Meibohm were pillars of the school and church, and many children and members called the school "Mr. Vix's school" and the church "Mr. Vix's church" and the pastor "Mr. Vix's pastor."

## Strange Stories

Some 153 miles northwest of New Orleans, St. Paul Mission was started in Mansura, Louisiana. The story is that a member of St. Paul's in New Orleans, Henry Thomas, was a bird catcher by profession. This brought him to the neighborhood of Mansura for a while. He took with him his Bible and his Catechism but found no Lutherans at Mansura. Whenever anyone asked him to what church he belonged, he said that he had once been a Roman Catholic, but by reading the Bible he had become a Lutheran and had joined a colored Lutheran church in New Orleans.

Still, challenges remained. About two months after Thomas had settled in Mansura, P. M. Lehman, Scott Normand and Peter Batiest were repairing the chimney of Widow Lehman's house near Mansura. When their work was done, they sat down to rest and talk a while. The conversation drifted to the treatment that the colored people and their children were receiving at the hands of the priest. Referring to the new church in Mansura, one of the three complained: "We have built a heaven in Mansura but cannot get in!" Their children were being neglected, they said. If they only had a school for their children and a church! Thomas happened along. He told them of the work the Lutheran church was doing in New Orleans and suggested to them that they invite his pastor, Rev. Lankenau, to come and preach, which they did. Another story was told about a black couple in Mansura who belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and were blessed with a pair of twins. Being poor, they offered the usual fee in the case of a baptismal ceremony. However, the priest baptized one of the twins and told the parents to come back with the other infant when they had the fee.

Another story was reported to Rev. K. Kretzschmar. A man whose wife passed away insisted on having a comparatively expensive burial ceremony. Being poor, he had no means to pay the priest the fee but would undoubtedly have done so as soon as he had sold his prospective cotton crop. The priest, however, had not the patience to wait so long. He sent the constable to the man's house, who confiscated the horse of the poor man while he was working his farm and caring for his crop.

This handful of stories serves to show the need for the pure preaching and teaching of the Gospel. As such, St. Paul's congregation in Cocoville, Mansura started a daughter congregation in Alexandria called Augustana Lutheran Church. St. Paul's congregation has furnished 12 men and more students for the work of Lutheran churches and schools than any other congregation in black ministry. By 1926, there were 8 churches and one preaching station, six pastors, thirteen teachers, three pastors teaching school, 824 pupils in the day school, 757 in the Sunday school, 1187 baptized members and 679 confirmed members and \$5,714.03 in contributions.

Today Louisiana has nine historic black congregations. The Missouri Synod has supported these congregations and others in Louisiana through mercy ministry, especially during the devastation of hurricane Katrina in 2005, when many were affected by flooding and wind damage. Unfortunate, St. Paul's, Mansura has been lost to an independent Lutheran group and is no longer an LCMS congregation.

## The Southeastern and North Carolina Field

In 1880, Rev. W. R. Buehler, a Lutheran minister who had been a missionary among the Gallas tribe in Africa, traveled with his wife and children to family property in Green Bay in Prince Edward County, Virginia, for health reasons. Knowing that their new neighbor had formerly been a missionary in Africa, the black folks at Green Bay asked Buehler to preach to them and to teach their children. The spiritual and living conditions of the people moved him to pity, and he granted their request. Buehler wrote several



letters to the Mission Board for Black Ministry. He was colloquized and started the mission among the blacks with donated land from his wife's family.

Four miles southwest of Green Bay is Meherrin, with a large black settlement, and the Doswell family asked Rev. Buehler to come and preach to them and teach their children, too. From this request, St. Matthew's Lutheran Church was created in 1883, and still exists today. The congregation began with 34 baptized members, 29 confirmed members and 20 weekly worshipers, and while St. Matthew has had a long and trying history, she has weathered the storms of life and still stands as a testimony of loyalty and fidelity to the Lutheran faith.

The healthier work of mercy and mission came from North Carolina, where Rev. Nils Bakke had been called to work with the blacks in Concord. Attention had been drawn to the fact that there were black Lutheran pastors and congregations in North Carolina after the Civil War. In 1889, the Synod of North Carolina held its convention in the Old St. John's Church in Cabarrus County, about six miles from the city of Concord. Four black pastors were present; they had a voice, a vote and were recognized as members, along with the others. At this convention, the committee on "Work among the Freedmen" recommended "that the colored brethren connected with this Synod be allowed to form themselves into a synod." This recommendation was adopted and on Wednesday, May 8, 1889, in St. John's Church, the first black Lutheran Synod was organized, adopting the name "Alpha Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Freedman in America."

This new Synod consisted of four pastors and five congregations with about 180 baptized members. The white congregations supported this new Synod with prayers, moral support and limited financial support.

The pastors of the Alpha Synod were Rev. David James Koonts with two congregations, Davidson County and Concord, North Carolina; Rev. Samuel Holt with a small congregation at Springdale, Alamance County; Rev. Nathan Clapp, who held services twice a month in a public schoolhouse near Leon College and Rev. William Philo Phifer, who held services in a lodge hall in Charlotte.

## **Bakke is transferred to Concord**

A year and three weeks after the Alpha Synod was organized, President Koonts died and the Alpha Synod appealed to the Synodical Conference for support. Rev. Dr. Henry Schwan received the appeal and forwarded the appeal letter to the Mission Board in St. Louis. The Mission Board instructed Rev. Bakke, Rev. Burgdorf and Rev. Schoof to investigate the situation in North Carolina and, in 1891, Rev. Bakke was asked to move to the new field. Rev. Bakke arrived in Concord with his family on September 18 to pastor Grace Lutheran Church, which had 40 baptized members and 20 confirmed members.

In 1883, Rev. Koonts and members bought an old frame building, which had first been used as a store and then as the city post office. One part of the building served as a parsonage and the rest as church and school. When Rev. Koonts died, the school in Concord closed. Rev. Bakke reopened the school in 1891 and taught it until Teacher E. Rolf took charge of the school in 1893. In 1895, a new school was built.

At the end of September 1898, Rev. Bakke was transferred to Charlotte, North Carolina. On October 3, 1920, Grace received its first black pastor, Rev. Paul D. Lehman, a graduate of Immanuel Lutheran College at Greensboro. Lehman was a son of St. Paul's, Mansura, Louisiana. Today Grace is still one of the largest black congregations in the Southeastern District.

Due to the work of the Holy Spirit and the faithful pastoral preaching and care by these men, in 1926 the Carolinas had 23 black congregations, one college, Immanuel Lutheran College, seven day schools and 16 pastors and professors in the mission field.

### **Other Congregations and Isolated Places**

From 1886 to 1926, there were other areas of the country where blacks were brought into the Lutheran church through mercy, education and Gospel proclamation. Places like Springfield, Illinois, under Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, in 1881 started Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and School; in 1925, Grace, Jacksonville, Illinois; St. Philip's, Chicago, Illinois, begun by Rev. M. N. Carter in 1924; Immanuel, Cincinnati, Ohio, begun by Rev. George Kase in 1922; Grace, St. Louis, Missouri, begun by Rev. Lucius Thalley in 1903; St. Philip's, St. Louis, begun by Rev. Paul E. Gose; St. Paul's, Los Angeles, California, begun by Rev. Walter F. Troeger in Santa Monica and by Rev. J. W. Theiss in Los Angeles in 1919; Mount Zion, Oakland, California, begun by Rev. J. McDavid in 1926; St. Mark's, Atlanta, Georgia, begun in 1913 by Rev. Nils J. Bakke; St. Philip's, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, begun by city missionary Emil Polzin in 1918; Bethany, Yonkers, New York, begun by Rev. Alexander von Schlichten in 1901.

### **God's Word and Luther's Doctrine Pure in the Black Belt of Alabama**

On his tour of exploration Rev. Doescher also visited Mobile, Alabama, where he remained two weeks and established a Sunday school. In December 1881, the station was closed because it seemed to be unpromising. For about 34 years, the 900,000 black people in the state of Alabama had no opportunity to hear the everlasting Gospel that had been brought to light again by the great Reformer Martin Luther. Then the unexpected cry came from Alabama, "Come over and help us!"

In the "Cotton State," educational opportunities for black children were deplorable. Many of the schools for blacks were private schools. Such a private school was opened at Rosebud in Wilcox County by Teacher Rosa J. Young in 1912.

Rosa grew up in an African Methodist Episcopal Church. Her father was a circuit rider for some 20 years. She received her education in the elementary school and at Payne University in Selma, Alabama. After her graduation the people at Rosebud asked her to open a private school for the children of the community. She received five acres from her family and erected a frame schoolhouse and chapel. Thus was established "The Rosebud Literacy and Industrial School." The school was soon crowded with 215 students and two additional teachers. The older girls were instructed in sewing and cooking.

In 1914, the cotton boll weevil invaded Wilcox County and brought along hard times. The two assistant teachers were dismissed. Rosa sought help in a letter to Dr. Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institution in Tuskegee, Alabama. Dr. Washington knew of the educational work of the Synodical Conference among blacks in the south and suggested Rosa write to the Lutheran Church for assistance.

Rosa wrote to Rev. C. F. Drewes, the Mission Director, for help and Rev. Drewes sent Field Secretary Rev. N. J. Bakke to look into the matter and to report. As a result of his visit, Rosa turned the school over to the Lutheran church.

The Rosebud Literacy and Industrial School became Christ Lutheran Church and School in 1916, the mother church of black Lutheranism in Alabama. Rev. Bakke, Rosa Young and other pastors and educators planted 30 schools and 35 congregations in Alabama and Pensacola, Florida. Concordia College Alabama eventually came out of this mission endeavor.

Rev. Bakke said in a letter about the Alabama field, “The ignorance here in all matters is simply beyond measure.” Rosa Young wrote, “The people are poor, very, very ignorant, rough, and untrained. They are superstitious and immoral. The present deplorable condition of my race is due largely to their former training and immoral leaders.” She said, “None of them ever told us: Christ is your Savior, who died for your sins. Believe in Him, then you are saved.” Not even the sick and the aged were cared for or visited.

On Psalm Sunday and Easter Sunday, in 1916, 58 persons were baptized and 70 confirmed. On Easter Day, Christ congregation was organized with 117 baptized members, 70 confirmed members and 22 voting members. In less than a year, the congregation at Rosebud had 187 baptized members and 112 confirmed members. The rich harvest in the Alabama field was unprecedented in the annals of our black missions and a promise of what was still to come in the Black Belt of Alabama.

Ultimately, the Alabama mission field produced the largest numbers of churches, pastors, educators and professors for the Lutheran Church. Those who are familiar with the extensive work on the Alabama field know of pastors and educators like: Schmidt; Westcott; Kennell; Ellwanger; Jones; Dahlke; Holness; W. H. Lane, the first black pastor called by the Missionary Board to the Alabama field; R.O.L. Lynn, the first president of Alabama Luther College/Lutheran Academy; Peay; Berger; Lehman; Eddleman; Roberts; Dominick; Lavalais; Laurent; Neely; Moss; Gildersleeve; Pledger; Skinner; Thompsons; Gailles; Jenkins; Hunt; Graeber; Herzfield; Hazberg; Poole; Bates; Grigsby; Johnson; Means; Cozart; Tervalon; Montgomery; Carlson; King, Griffin; Bodleys; Bridges; Steward; Kent; Dickerson; Odom; Clark; Wiggins; Clancy; Jenkins; Ramsey; Marshalls; Davis; Browns; Nye; Noon; Stallworth; Johnson; McCullam; unnamed others; and many who were products of the Alabama mission field but who served elsewhere.

There were 30 Lutheran schools, 35 congregations and the Alabama Lutheran Academy and College, Selma, Ala., on the Alabama mission field by 1949 – the year of the printing of Dr. Rosa J. Young’s autobiography, “Light in the Dark Belt.” Dr. Rosa J. Young (1890-1971), known as the “mother of Black Lutheranism in central Alabama,” was a strong advocate of education for rural children, and she was instrumental in founding and promoting the development of Lutheran schools and congregations in Alabama’s Black Belt. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has produced a 42-minute film to chronicle her life and her accomplishments: “The First Rosa: Teacher, Confessor, Church Planter” ([lcms.org/thefirstrosa](http://lcms.org/thefirstrosa)). This film educates and inspires young men and women throughout the Missouri Synod to accept God’s call to become pastors and teachers.

John L. McDowell wrote, “The chief aim and purpose of the mission schools and [church] is to impart to the pupils a treasure of religious truths, to make them wise unto salvation, and to qualify them to be good citizens, good men and women.” Throughout a variety of states, eras, pastors and people, the Lord used witness, mercy and life together to bring many people to faith in Christ and to the mission and ministry of His Church. This is made evident in so many places, especially the Alabama mission field. ✠