

# The VOICE

February 2021

Missouri District Newsletter

**In This Issue:  
Black Ministry Across the District**

*Student at Lutheran North, St. Louis*

# From the President's Desk

## Black Ministry: "Our Roots and Future are in Him"

The roots of Black Ministry in the LCMS date back to 1877. The first missionary, Rev. J.F. Doescher, was sent by the Western District (which became the Missouri District). Rev. Doescher established congregations in Little Rock, Memphis, and New Orleans. Rev. Nils Bakke, Doescher's successor, would become instrumental in establishing congregations along with Dr. Rosa J. Young through Alabama and Concordia College in Selma, Alabama. Another region where ministry to African Americans began in the 1870s was in North Carolina. Immanuel Lutheran College in Greensboro, North Carolina would be established in 1903 for the training of African Americans including for pastoral ministry.

As a sixteen year old, I heard Rev. Dr. William Griffin speak at the 1986 LCMS Youth Gathering in Washington D.C. It was fascinating to hear these first-hand stories about the Civil Rights Movement from a Lutheran pastor in Montgomery, Alabama and then in Chicago. He told of his relationship with Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, and Rosa Parks. Dr. Griffin was born to a third generation LCMS family in Kannapolis, North Carolina and attended Immanuel in Greensboro for his seminary training. He would be one of the leaders who established what is known today as the Black Clergy Caucus in the Synod. A 2019 issue of the LCMS Black Ministry newsletter includes a feature on Dr. Griffin as he celebrated his 90th birthday (available online at [www.lcms.org](http://www.lcms.org)).

Black history in the LCMS, like in our nation, includes both times of celebration and grief. The closure of Concordia College, Alabama, has been painful for many in our Synod, but especially for the black families who had ties to Selma. Rev. Dr. Richard Dickinson's book, *Roses and Thorns*, published in 1977 for the centennial of Black Ministry in the Synod provides a picture of the hardship and the joys of our historically black congregations and schools. Another way to learn more about our history is to view the documentary *The First Rosa*, about Dr. Rosa J. Young, who was instrumental in establishing Concordia College Alabama and congregations and schools that served African American families throughout Alabama ([www.lcms.org/thefirstrosa](http://www.lcms.org/thefirstrosa)).

This issue of The VOICE focuses on Black Ministry in the Missouri District and the opportunity for us to give thanks to the blessings of the past and celebrate what God is doing among us today. Our prayer is that God will continue to open up new doors for the Gospel in our communities. It is good for us to recognize the great things that God is doing even in the midst of these challenging times. The Church's history is also one of bearing the cross and proclaiming the cross. May God continue to bless that proclamation and give us the strength to bear the cross in our day.

In closing, I share with you Dr. Griffin's words from the above newsletter. He says of Black Ministry in the LCMS, "Our roots and our future are in Him, the Holy Triune God, who created us in His own image when we were lost; He redeemed us with His innocent suffering and death and by rising again on Easter morning. And by His Holy Spirit, He sanctified us in Him; our past is blessed and our future is secure. In the words of the hymn, "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come."

Fraternally in Christ,

*R. Lee Hagan*

President Lee Hagan



# Black History... and Our Future

The VOICE joins the nation in celebrating a month of Black History with four stories from Missouri District churches and schools. These ministries are four among many leading us with godly repentance, reconciliation, and renewal in our mission to be among those who Christ leads to fulfil the Revelation 7 vision, "I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb... and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

— Revelation 7:9-10

It might surprise many that the LCMS has a rich history in Black Ministry. In the decades following the Civil War, the training of black pastors and the planting of black churches in the South grew with each decade in our Synod. However, in the twentieth century, the Second Industrial Revolution and World War II created opportunities for black people to move from densely populated rural areas in the South where our mission efforts were focused. As black people migrated throughout the country, our congregations failed to see and embrace the changing diversity of their communities.

I grew up in Chicago in the 1960s and 70s. I witnessed many churches, including my own, relocate from their urban neighborhoods. In the 80s as I trained to be a pastor, I recall reading Dr. King's words that, "Sunday at 11:00" was the "most segregated hour in this nation." Biblically, confessionally, and from my own history, I began to form a missiology that ultimately the goal of every congregation is to reflect a Revelation 7 vision of being multi-ethnic, reflecting their community rather than a homogeneous culture.

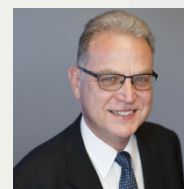
Indeed, there are occasions—especially when language barriers exist—where intentional specific cultural mission efforts are necessary. Yet ultimately, if we are to reach "the children" and "their children's children," the goal of Christian mission is a Revelation 7 multi-ethnic vision.

The future of Black Ministry is ripe with opportunity. Over 700,000 Missourians (12%) are black. That's nearly double the population of all other minority groups combined in Missouri. We have a tremendous mission gap to cross! And by the power of the Gospel and the Spirit, we shall!

The stories in this newsletter show a future of Black Ministry that is far from "separate, but equal." These are churches and schools embracing diversity, raising up black and white people together in ministry. These are the stories that reclaim a vision where the power of the cross breaks down the barriers of prejudice so prevalent among rival cultures and factions. It is the story of a diversity of peoples washed in the blood of the Lamb and worshipping together. It is the story of healing we desperately need, and where Christ has provided, the cure: "... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." — Revelation 7:17

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# Making Connections in Urban Ministry

Bethlehem Lutheran Church is located in the North St. Louis area. The congregation has expanded its outreach beyond the Hyde Park Neighborhood to now also serving the neighborhoods of Ferguson and Jennings, as well as other St. Louis North City and County areas. The staff and pastors at Bethlehem, Rev. John Schmidtke and Rev. Dr. Gerard Bolling, keep very busy expanding the work of the Lutheran Hope Center in Ferguson by rebranding it as the Lutheran Hope Center for Families with a clear outreach to children and families.



*Rev. Dr. Bolling baptizing.*

"Our bigger role, to be the best that we can be, is really the role of connector and coach," says Rev. Schmidtke, "...most people still care about Ferguson, and everything that happened there. And many people care about the urban areas, the inner city, and so the premise is that they need a connector. They want to send a check, but they also want to come and participate 'How do I do that?'. So we become the connector."

Pre-pandemic, almost 200 Lutherans in the St. Louis area volunteered with Bethlehem, many on a regular basis. But there is room for more growth, Schmidtke says, "We don't believe that we have to do it all ourselves. We become the equipping force, then it becomes exponential of how much it can be in the future too." And Rev. Dr. Bolling notes the positive influence that coming together as Lutherans can bring:

"To be able to lead ministry together as Lutheran congregations all in the same place in St. Louis, and again kind of have this regional St. Louis idea of 'us' doing ministry that's meaningful to kids. And also bridging gaps, you know, between people. Economic gaps are bridged, right, between people of means and kids without. Racial gaps are bridged, right, between people. And spiritual gaps are bridged too, because our kids get to see how big the Body of Christ is and what that means."

While Bethlehem can assist families with their physical needs, Rev. Schmidtke and Rev. Dr. Bolling note that what defines Bethlehem is the focus on addressing and feeding people spiritually, "Are there giveaways of things? Sometimes," explains Bolling, "...But, I'll tell you with confidence the most lasting effect we have on people is when they can lock in spiritually...that they know the Giver of All... We want them to be in the congregation on Sunday- that's our goal for them." Rev. Schmidtke remarks, "You're not going to find a way that's going to be problem proof...None of us are called to do nothing... we are called to stand and bring Christ."



*Neighborhood kids engage in fellowship and fun at a Bethlehem program.*

Hear more about the work that Rev. Schmidtke and Rev. Dr. Bolling do with Bethlehem in the upcoming "Meet the Missionaries" video series February 23 at 7 pm. There's no cost to participate and those attending can ask questions directly to the speakers. Simply visit [mo.lcms.org/missionaries](https://mo.lcms.org/missionaries) for the link and dial-in phone number.

# CHRISTIAN CONNECTIONS

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. Hebrews 10:24-25*

Imagine this: Packing up and traveling to a new home—over 7,000 miles away. Entering an unfamiliar and different world. It's even a challenge to speak the local language. But despite all of these hurdles, one of the largest struggles is finding a church home and a place to worship God. This is what happened to a group of Christians from the Democratic Republic of Congo when they settled in the Kansas City area. However, through other Christian Congolese, they discovered that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was in unison with their own Christian church's beliefs and might be able to help. Enter Messiah Lutheran Church and School in Independence.



*Michael Wemimo drives kids to Messiah Lutheran School with their van.*

Independence is located about a 20 minute drive east of Kansas City, and Messiah is blessed with space to share. The Congolese use Messiah's gymnasium for their activities. Michael Wemimo, a leader with the Congolese group, notes that it's a major blessing to have a space "to praise God, and share worshipping God with one another...And the Lutheran pastors, especially Pastor Mueller, are helping us a lot. I mean, giving us the support we need, to make sure that the gymnasium is open when we need to use it—even for Christmas worship service—or even if we have other events, that we are able to use the gymnasium, which is something that we really appreciate."

Michael Wemimo also serves in the community as a driver to help many of the children attend Messiah Lutheran School. Six of the Congolese students joined Messiah in the 2020-2021 school year and represent a major part of Messiah's total enrollment of 33 (from early childhood-4th grade). Messiah's school received a grant for scholarships for the Congolese students from the Missouri District that came from the 2019 Lutheran Education Association Convocation, held in St. Louis. Messiah's Principal Eric Eckhoff says the Congolese children are a huge blessing. "The kids fit in so well," says Eckhoff who notes that the biggest hurdle to overcome was getting the kids to and from the school, "Transportation has been the big, big issue... Once we got that hammered out, they have been here faithfully everyday." That transportation issue was solved with a van that was purchased with the help of a Missouri District mission grant and LUMA (Lutheran Urban Mission Agency). Support and resources are also provided by the Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, whose pastor, Rev. Brad Zerkel, also serves as the director of LUMA.



Helping this group of Congolese is very important to the people and mission of Messiah. Rev. Bart Mueller, pastor at Messiah, summarizes, "Our long-term overarching concern with this particular group of Christians that we've gotten in touch with, is trying to help them prepare the next generation for life in America as Congolese." Messiah is working to strengthen the connection with the Congolese group and explore LCMS training opportunities for their leaders.

*Congolese worshippers pose in front of the van bought with District & LUMA assistance.*



# Lutheran North Middle & High School

Located in unincorporated North St. Louis, lies the successful and diverse Lutheran North Middle and High School. With an enrollment of almost 270, this private Lutheran school works hard to keep pushing for academic excellence while balancing accommodations for COVID-19. Dr. Tim Brackman, principal for Lutheran North, explains the many different aspects that have been incorporated, "North has a large percentage of families that want to be in the school building and a large percentage of families that aren't comfortable for their children to be in the building. So we have an all virtual option, where students can never come in the building, then a two day option [with classes divided alphabetically]... we have a four day option too, where they can be in the building most of the time."

The flexibility of meeting families where they feel safe during COVID-19 owes much of its success to its faculty and staff adapting to many changes. In addition to physical safety measures, such as mask wearing, air cleaners, and temperature and wellness checks, Dr. Brackman notes that there were many small changes in regards to teaching and scheduling in the first semester, and that it's an ongoing process. The school has developed extra support for hybrid learning, such as starting an earlier dismissal so that students behind on work have the opportunity to check in with teachers daily. Also Wednesdays are virtual learning days at Lutheran North, with classes taught virtually in the morning. The afternoon is a time for students to connect with teachers for additional help. This also allows teachers to develop their material for a variety of classrooms. "That's been probably the largest challenge," says Brackman of having students at many different levels of hybrid learning, "Just trying to adequately teach your group in front of you that you see everyday (or almost every day), your group that you're going to see once or twice—but not the next couple of days, and then the group at home who are not in the building, but still part of the class."

The school is not just diverse by the different styles of hybrid learning, though, it is a very racially and socially-economically diverse school. Dr. Brackman describes the school neighborhood "...we are a more diverse school. Traditionally our Lutheran schools have been kind of white, German-Lutheran in heritage, and so forth. That's not necessarily the picture here, as many of our communities have changed, and the schools have opened their doors to people from the community. ...but so often I feel that we limit our definition of diversity to black and white—especially in St. Louis—to black and white. And we're so much more than that. Social-economically, we're really diverse. From a Lutheran standpoint, we're probably about 30-35% Lutheran. So there's a lot of diverse Christianity here with Baptist, and non-denominational, and Methodists, and Lutherans, and so forth, not to mention the racial and ethnic, which, of course, we are really excited about too."



# Historic Roots Find Growth

The historic congregation of Immanuel in urban Kansas City has its fair share of struggles—decreasing congregation size compared to decades past, school closure, a pastoral vacancy, and it's situated in the heart of a neighborhood that was historically connected to institutional racism. But the congregation has found a unique way to keep sharing the Gospel of Christ to its neighborhood: a partnership with the Lutheran Urban Mission Agency (LUMA).

First established in 1870, Immanuel was the first LCMS congregation in the Kansas City area. (It's often referred to as the "mother church" for all the other Lutheran churches in the greater Kansas City area.) In 1930, it moved to its current location on Tracy Avenue. Over the years a school building was built that had success, but then closed in the 1980s for financial reasons and now serves as Section 8 housing. According to lifelong member Rich Saeger, Immanuel has had a food pantry for the neighborhood since the 1960s and 1970s, which has grown and developed over time and helped the "food vacuum." In recent years, LUMA's Community Outreach Coordinator, Kelsha James reached out to Immanuel about partnering to connect to people in the neighborhood.

Immanuel and LUMA have been working hard to develop Immanuel's fellowship hall to serve as a larger space for all of LUMA's needs. But after months and months of mold removal and cleaning, the space is quite a blessing. The fellowship hall has more accessibility and more space—especially useful during COVID-19 as patrons can safely social distance in a warm building while waiting for supplies.

LUMA has expanded not only to supply food, but also cleaning supplies, laundry detergent, other household items (like shower curtains), and a diaper program called "Happy Bottoms". They have also recently launched a program called "Birthday Bags" where pantry clients get a decorated bag with hand drawn notes and a birthday treat. Says James, "Just something to make them feel special because you never know, especially during this time of COVID, that may be the only birthday present they receive. It's hard times right now for everybody, no matter what economic status you're in."



*Kelsha James (right) helps at LUMA food pantry hosted at Immanuel.*

Currently Immanuel's vacancy pastor is Rev. David Reimnitz, senior pastor at Bethlehem in Raymore. Lisa Williams, Congregational President at Immanuel, sums up the impact that LUMA and Immanuel have together on urban ministry:



*Immanuel's 1930s church building.*

"It would be our dream and prayer that not only do we continue to meet their physical needs, but that others will see another congregation here—kind of Immanuel 2.0—to marry Word and Sacrament and family ministries and children's sunday schools and vacation bible schools... there are a lot of other churches in our neighborhood, it's not like we're the only church. But, obviously I believe we have a unique message around grace alone, faith alone, and scripture alone. And people are hungry for that. You don't have to 'live your best life now' and 'pick yourself up' Jesus has done that for you," says Williams, "...The African American community, the Hispanic community, they're all vital here, and all hungry to hear the Gospel."

# UPCOMING MISSOURI DISTRICT EVENTS



## Meet the Missionaries

February 23, 7PM Virtual Series

"Meet the Missionaries" is back in 2021! Join us for three more virtual gatherings in the next few months. We'll be featuring Black Ministry, Campus Ministry, and Church Planting Through Lutheran Schools. Come hear about how you can be involved through prayer and gifts. Head to [mo.lcms.org/missionaries](https://mo.lcms.org/missionaries) for all the details.



## Tell the Next Generation

March 13, 2021 Virtual Conference

Learn from experts top ways to equip families in faith formation in the home (especially for primary grade children and adolescents). Visit [mo.lcms.org/ttng](https://mo.lcms.org/ttng) for more information.



## MEGA Gathering Youth Event

April 10, 2021

The Mega Gathering is an online format this year. Senior and Junior Youth can join together to hear from a main speaker, participate in Bible Studies and break out sessions, and jam out to some music. Watch for the information packet coming soon!



## SHINE! Servant Event

April 16-25, 2021

We're getting closer to our first ever statewide servant event: SHINE! Remember to register your group at [mo.lcms.org/shine](https://mo.lcms.org/shine) before March 15th to receive free t-shirts. You pick the project that works best for your group, schedule, and safety restrictions. Register today!



Missouri District

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH — MISSOURI SYNOD