

Out of the Blocks:

*Hurdles Encountered in the
Synodical Conference's
Mission to Black Americans*

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In the world of track and field, a race can come down to the first few steps after the gun goes off. Athletes spend much time practicing only those moments coming out of the blocks, because they know that even one false step could cost them the race. Timing, stride, and nerves all play together in determining if the runner gets off to a good start. Perhaps the greater test is the one of character- what does a runner do if he doesn't get the desired good start? How will he run out that race- fearing loss and with regret, or with the determination to succeed?

This paper will look at the beginnings of the work among black Americans done by the Synodical Conference at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th. There were false steps taken, and there were set backs. Yet the finish line was reached, and God's Word was spread- a testament to its power, and the grace of our God who has entrusted that Word to us. The paper will offer a brief history of the fields of labor, and focus on the challenges with which each was faced.

The Synodical Conference was certainly not the first to work among the blacks. Danish Lutherans had worked in the West Indies with blacks caught in the cycle of the slave trade already in the early 1700's. Virginia Lutherans were not far behind, as well as the Salzburgers in Georgia. Dr. Jeff Johnson, author of Black Christians: The Untold Lutheran Story, suggests that failing to recognize this was the first mistake of the New Lutherans of the Synodical Conference. Their attitude was entirely one of 'enlightening' these black heathens, failing to recognize that there were possibly Christians among the former slaves of the South. In fact, there were even Lutherans if the Conference had known where to look. Johnson writes,

"The mission board had obviously not bothered to do its homework before sending that missionary. The tour itself was not at all informative. Had the

Synodical Conference or the man they sent done a minimum of research, they would have revealed exactly where to begin: the Carolinas, Virginia, and Tennessee.”¹

Dr. Johnson speaks rather strongly. There would have been any number of concerns if the Conference had simply tried to pick up another church body’s defunct work. But it would perhaps be fair to say that efforts were begun with a somewhat distorted view of the work.

The mission was started, to put it somewhat crassly, to continue contributions to mission work. It was reasoned that if the people of the member synods weren’t shown something for the money they were giving, they would stop giving. The premise is probably true, but not the best reason for spreading the Gospel. The case for such work was presented with suitable evangelical desire to spread God’s word, but then committees and men got involved. F. D. Lueking, as quoted in Rose and Thorns, writes:

“The stated reason for launching a new mission venture lacked much resemblance to Siever’s evangelical urgency. The three parish pastors who comprised the Synodical Conference committee on mission work stated their case thus: ‘If we make no use of the desire of our Lutheran Christians to do something for heathen missions, they will surely apply their money where we would not like to see it go. For we cannot for conscience’ sake support the [missionary societies of Germany].’”²

Dickson also states that the desire to be in mission work was part of the pioneering spirit of the times, considering the exploits of David Livingstone and others, a spirit that carried over into the work of the church. Certainly this wasn’t the only reason work was begun among the blacks of the South, but to a degree it was part of a ‘fad.’³

Whatever the case, God worked through the missionaries who were sent out.

¹ Johnson, Jeff. Black christians: the untold lutheran story. St. Louis: CPH, 1991. p 152.

² Dickson, Richard. Roses and thorns. St. Louis: CPH, 1977. p 39.

³ Ibid. p 33.

There were other hardships and obstacles much less speculative. The first true hurdles would prove to be the by-products of much larger problems. One was that the new mission to the blacks would lose its first missionary to the Election Controversy. The other was old-fashioned hatred.

In October, 1877, the Conference installed a veteran missionary from the Dakota fields, John F. Doescher, as the missionary to the blacks. The plan was that he would tour the South, locate the most likely areas for work, and start to gather groups of responsive blacks. He preached to a few black groups at different locations in Memphis, then began work in Little Rock, Arkansas, among the city's 6000 blacks. He resolved to start a Sunday school here, and by December things were going well; so well he did not want to leave in order to conduct the tour that the mission committee had sent him to perform.

In January, he resumed his travels, criss-crossing the South and preaching in any number of places. There were white Conference congregations around that were serving as his hosts, but they had had little contact with blacks. By the middle of 1878, after recovering from a period of illness, Doescher reported the need of continued work in the fields he had visited.

But this was a difficult time in the South for a black person. In 1875 conservatives won back the Mississippi state elections. Here and in South Carolina and Louisiana reconstruction governments were overthrown, and in 1879 there was a mass exodus of blacks from these areas. Just as the Synodical Conference was trying to bring them the gospel, many of these black people were moving out. The Ku Klux Klan made their presence known, and some of these early Lutheran pastors were threatened and in at least

one case beaten. ⁴

As for Doescher, he returned to New Orleans. Here in April of 1878 he had founded Mount Zion, the oldest black Lutheran congregation in continuous existence. It was centered in the "Sailor's Home," a building described as dark spooky, horrible, and completely unsuitable for a mission. But his return in December of 1878 found the Sunday school flourishing there, under two young ladies from the local white congregation, Zion.

Then in March of 1879, Doescher dedicated St. Paul's Lutheran Church. He had to beg for the funding for it, and with the \$300 he had received he built a structure of rough lumber that came to be called "The Chicken-Coop." Within two years a teacher was called and a successful school was also begun here. ⁵

Doescher's problems weren't limited to his taste in architecture and worship spaces. Early on, in Little Rock, he had shown a willingness to work with other denominations, but was apparently set back on the right path. Unfortunately, the work he had started in Little Rock had dwindled. But other problems were brewing. In March of 1879, he accepted a call to a white congregation, St. John's, in New Orleans. Within a few months, though, he was no longer in the Synodical Conference. The Election Controversy found him heading to the Ohio Synod. He took a large number of the black converts of Mount Zion with him.

But God works in all things- the move of Doescher back into a white parish led the Missionary Board of the Synodical Council to call a recent graduate of Concordia

⁴ Ibid. p 41-43.

⁵ Ibid, p 46.

Seminary, St. Louis, to take up the work among the blacks in New Orleans. This man, who would spend his entire ministry in this work, was Dr. Niles Jules Bakke. In his first two years Bakke lost more members than he gained. But he faithfully ran the race God placed before him. In December 1882, the congregation was able to move out of the “Sailor’s Home” and into better quarters. From then on, the mission seems to have prospered.

One of the sources for this paper is aptly titled Roses and Thorns. It details the many successes as well as the many hardships of the Conference’s work among the blacks in the South. Before looking at more of the challenges, consider these ‘roses.’ The Louisiana field was comprised mainly of urban congregations where missionaries were able to work more freely with blacks than in some of the rural areas. Out in the country they sometimes faced problems due to white interference. But one rural congregation, St. Paul’s in Mansura, LA, has been a great blessing to the Lord’s Church. From this one congregation have come 13 Black Lutheran pastors. They proclaimed themselves the “Sons of Mansura,”⁶ and others affectionately call them the “Mansura Mafia.”⁷ St. Paul’s was actually in a small town two miles from Mansura. This small town was once named Cocoville, but its name was changed to Lutherville.

While Mansura produced quite a number of black Lutheran pastors, the first blacks to serve as pastors in Conference work came from another mission field – North Carolina. Work here began differently. The Synodical Conference entered the field by invitation, an invitation issued by the short-lived Alpha Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Freedmen in America (simply called the Alpha Synod, 1889-1891). This was

⁶ Ibid, p 52.

⁷ Johnson, Jeff. Black lutherans: the untold story. St. Louis: CPH, 1991. p 158.

a group of black Lutheran congregations that were no longer receiving the support of the North Carolina Synod, and whose leaders appealed to the Missouri Synod for help. Among those leaders were four black pastors: Rev. David Koontz, Rev. Samuel Holt, Rev. Nathan Clapp, and Rev. William Philo Phifer. The request was forwarded to the Synodical Conference, and Bakke and two other pastors who worked among the blacks were sent to investigate.

Here they encountered a different problem. They had men in pulpits who had no training, and who were Lutheran in name only. The new problem to be overcome was the need to train pastors. An earlier attempt had been made in Little Rock with the establishment of St. Paul's Academy, but the work in Little Rock was up and down, and the absence of a resident pastor perhaps led to its demise.

In North Carolina efforts met with much more success. Immanuel Seminary and College was opened in 1903 in Concord, NC. Two years later the school was moved to Greensboro, NC. It offered seminary training for pastoral candidates, a two year normal school for teachers, and a high school. Also in 1903, Luther College was opened in New Orleans according to the same pattern. Between 1890 and 1915, 19 males studied for the pastoral ministry of the Synodical Conference as well as having 22 men and women serve as teachers in Christian day schools maintained by the Conference.⁸

As stated, the work here began by invitation. Instead of seeking out blacks and gathering them into congregations, the Synodical Conference inherited a number of congregations. But they did not fail to open new sites either. Bakke, who had cut his teeth in mission work in New Orleans, diligently continued his work in North Carolina. In

⁸ Ibid, p 164.

1893, he started 4 congregations. In 1895-1898, 1 more each year, as well as 1 in 1900. By 1900, this field had 12 missions in North Carolina and 1 in Virginia. This Virginian congregation was also one that came from work before the Synodical Conference. It was St. Matthew's- founded in 1883 under the North Carolina Synod, now to become a Synodical Conference post.⁹

The Conference officials were careful to see that these new congregations were shepherded by men who were confessional and Lutheran not only in name. Perhaps they could have been somewhat more diplomatic. The work was supported with admirable zeal by the white congregations in the area, but at times the work was viewed as the work of the whites among the blacks, rather than allowing them to make it their own. The Mission Board had the ultimate say in most matters, and remembering the problems with Doescher, one may understand their concern. But Richard Dickson writes,

“If there is any key to understanding why Black work has encountered the problems it has, then that key lies in the refusal to allow local churchmen to judge what is best for their area. The imposition of white control stifled Black work almost at its inception.”¹⁰

The problem was that it was very difficult for a black man to rise to a position of authority. For someone to be a member of the Board, he had to be a member of one of the member synods. He had to be nominated by a caucus of the synod to which he belonged. But before any congregation could become a member of any of the constituent synods, it had to be self-supporting. Due to such restrictions, no black was elected to the Board until 1960, just after the Synodical Conference Negro Mission ended and was turned over, for the most part, to the LCMS. Meanwhile, white pastors, teachers and

⁹ Dickson, Richard. Roses and thorns. St. Louis: CPH, 1977. p 56.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 74.

superintendents of schools could and did belong to synods regardless of their congregations' fiscal status.¹¹

Our gracious God blessed the work, despite what errors may have been made. The North Carolina field surpassed the Louisiana field, and Immanuel College and Seminary in Greensboro, NC prepared black candidates for work among their own people. At least one graduate of Immanuel Seminary has served in the Wisconsin Synod- the Rev. Henry Grigsby, Class of 1931.

Rev. Grigsby came from Cross Lutheran Church in Camden, AL. Alabama was the third major field of the Mission, and it too was started by an invitation. A young black woman by the name of Rosa Young had started a school in Rosebud, AL. It was not a church affiliated school to begin with, but in 1914 the Mexican boll weevil which had moved across the South starting in Texas reached Alabama. It decimated the cotton crop, and sent the whole area into a severe economic plight. Parents could no longer pay the tuition for the school, and in the face of losing her school, Miss Young approached her church body, the American Methodist Episcopal Church. After trying some sources, Miss Young met with the president of Payne University, an AME institution, to see if they could help and consider it a type of feeder school for their university. President Archie and Dean Brooks of the university fought for taking up this cause, but to no avail. In a prophetic statement, Dean Brooks said,

“If we do not take that school, some other organization will take it. God is not going to let it fall, for that young woman is working too faithfully.”¹²

That organization would be the Synodical Conference. After all else failed, Miss

¹¹ Ibid, p 76.

¹² Young, Rosa. Light in the dark belt. St. Louis: CPH, 1950. p 99.

Young contacted Booker T. Washington himself at the Tuskegee Institute for advice. He told her that Lutheran groups, from what he had heard, were doing more than anyone else in the area of education for blacks in the South. He sent her the address of Rev. Christopher Drewes, chairman of the Board for Colored Missions of the Lutheran Church. He also sent a booklet detailing different organizations, Lutheran and otherwise, and she sent letters to a number of them. All denied her but one.¹³

Drewes had sent the letter on to Bakke for investigation, and in short, a new mission field was opened. Through December, 1915 and January, 1916 initial meetings were held and Rosa Young's school became the core of a new congregation and the start of this new field.

There were difficulties to be encountered as elsewhere, but as always God's Word marches on. Miss Young writes quite frankly about the ostracism she experienced, for the Lutheran faith was considered a "new religion" by most. It was also considered a white man's religion. Dickson states that Booker T. Washington, although he recognized the good done by the Lutherans, has been quoted as saying that if he met a black man who was anything other than Baptist or Methodist, he knew that "some white person had been messing with that man's religion."¹⁴

Mrs. Doris Grigsby, widow of the Rev. Grigsby, grew up in this area and this time. She was Lutheran her whole life, in fact baptized by Dr. Bakke. She related that her mother was the first in her family line to become Lutheran, and that her grandmother was probably hard on her mother for it. But, as with all things where God is concerned, obstacles were overcome. Mrs. Grigsby also said that the Baptist men of the area might

¹³ Ibid, p 99-105.

¹⁴ Dickson, Richard. Roses and thorns. St. Louis: CPH, 1977. p 20.

complain about that white preacher, but then they would be there at the Wednesday night meetings to learn from him.

There were at times hard feelings between the Baptist/ Methodist camp and the Lutherans, but she related even these with a sense of humor. Mrs. Grigsby explained that the Lutherans painted their churches in rural areas white with green trim, and in the urban areas tan with gold trim; if one was driving down the road one could tell at a glance what sort of church it was. She also told of one of her pastors who would drive into town on a Sunday, and if he saw any of his members headed the wrong way- to the Baptist church- they were told to jump in the car. "You go to *your* church," he would say. It would be safe to say there was at least a sense of 'competition.'¹⁵

Another major obstacle was the fact that life was changing in the South. Many blacks, as stated earlier, had headed north after the Civil War. Those who stayed had adjusted and settled primarily in rural areas. But the hard times were forcing more and more of the people from the country into the cities. Not only did they move to more urban centers, they also headed north again. Rev. Grigsby also served a congregation in Detroit, MI, which according to Mrs. Grigsby was almost entirely comprised of Southern Lutherans. To continue their work, the Conference adopted the school as the chief model for outreach. In 1916, 8 congregations were started with schools, 6 of which were in the very rural area of Wilcox County.

But in 1920, the work was heading to cities, although that might not have been seen at the time. In 1924 work was begun at the V.A. Hospital in Tuskegee and in Pensacola, FL. There were openings made in Selma, East Selma, and Birmingham, and in

¹⁵ Interview with Mrs. Grigsby, conducted 4/24/01.

1925 in Mobile, Lamison, and Atmore. Information from the U.S. Census Bureau shows the shift to cities, using Wilcox County- the center of the Lutheran efforts in Alabama. In 1910, Wilcox County was 82.7% rural; in 1940, 69%; and in 1950, 56.2% rural. The black population of Wilcox County was 27,602 in 1910; 19,319 in 1930, and 10,151 in 1980. This took its toll on school enrollments, which were such a big part of the congregations in the area.¹⁶

But the teachers of those schools also became an issue. Mrs. Grigsby stated that it was simply understood that a woman teaching school would be single. She presumes it was the idea that a married woman was to be at home. "Needless to say, it affected our desire to be teachers ourselves."¹⁷

There was also the pay. When Rosa Young's school was taken over by the Conference, the teachers' salaries were set by the Mission Board at \$20 per month. Miss Young's own sister had already quit by the time the Lutherans came, and it was to go to a government teaching position at \$60 per month. Many others who stayed around were lost as World War II came, since government jobs proliferated. And as late as the 1940's uglier issues had to be addressed. Schuetze notes Synodical Conference *Proceedings* to show the inequalities present:

"The inequality of salaries was a particular source of discontent. The salaries of white workers were comparable to those paid by the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods in their various districts. The salaries of the Negro workers 'were in keeping with the salaries offered Negro workers in the South at large,' which was lower. Their salaries were set by the Mission Board and the superintendents."¹⁸

Since the grade school was the chief model for expansion, the Synodical Conference

¹⁶ Johnson, Jeff. Black christians: the untold story. St. Louis: CPH, 1991. p 171.

¹⁷ Interview conducted 4/24/01.

¹⁸ Schuetze, Armin. The synodical conference: ecumenical endeavor. Milwaukee: NPH, 2000. p 153.

could perhaps have done more towards making entering the teaching ministry more feasible.

Rather than dwell on negatives, note also some of the blessings of the Alabama field. In 1922 Alabama Lutheran College was established in Selma for the education of blacks for ministry in the schools and churches that were sprouting up. It was the first Lutheran institution of higher education to be staffed entirely by blacks.¹⁹ Dickson said he had tracked 35 Black Lutheran pastors who came out of rural congregations in North Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana; of those 35, 28 came from Wilcox County, AL.²⁰

There is much more to the history of the Synodical Conference's Negro Mission. There are many names and events that this author would have liked to include, but this paper is meant to simply give an idea of what was undertaken, and the way God blessed the work despite the challenges that were encountered.

The Synodical Conference's work among the blacks faced any number of hurdles to be overcome. Some were placed there by poor planning; some perhaps even by mistaken views held by flawed humans. Whatever the case, God worked through the labor and blessed the efforts. The members of black Lutheran congregations today are indebted to those who went before and ran the race God laid out for them. All ministers of God's Word can look at the story of those early missionaries and lay people alike and remember, "The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong... (Ecclesiastes 9:11)." It is, rather, to the one who has the Lord with him.

¹⁹ Johnson, Jeff. Black Christians: the untold story. St. Louis: CPH, 1991. p 170.

²⁰ Dickson, Richard. Roses and thorns. St. Louis: CPH, 1977. p 70.

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