

St. Benedict the Moor

Greg Lutz and Jarrod Showalter

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St. Benedict also connects with:

- St. Francis of Assisi
- Blessed Martin de Porres
- Highland Avenue Methodist
- St. Michael's Catholic Church

Historical Overview

St. Benedict the Moor Mission traces its roots back to late 1908 when Captain Lincoln Valle, an African-American Catholic layman, came to Milwaukee to establish a black Catholic parish in the city's Bronzeville neighborhood. In 1911, the Capuchin order of friars took over the fledgling parish, which was located at 274 4th Street, by order of the archbishop. Shortly after, the parish welcomed its first resident pastor, Stephen Eckert, who was instrumental in growing the congregation and developing the parish boarding day and boarding school. After Fr. Eckert's passing in 1923, the cornerstone was laid for the mission's current chapel, funded in large part by Ernest Miller, president of the Miller Brewing Company. Over the next decade, additional support from Miller allowed the mission to purchase additional real estate surrounding the new chapel. This additional land was used for St. Anthony's hospital, a high school, and additional boarding school facilities. St. Anthony's was the first integrated hospital in Milwaukee, providing services to African-Americans and low-income families. While most students came from the surrounding Bronzeville community, students at the boarding school enrolled from around the country, coming from as far away as California. For approximately six decades, the mission was an institution in service to Milwaukee's black community. In the mid-twentieth century, federal urban renewal programs and the construction of Interstate 43 destroyed much of Bronzeville, dispersing the congregation to the north and west.

When it appeared that the parish itself was at risk of destruction, a Catholic Workers group that facilitated a prospering meal program began using the meal hall of St. Benedict the Moor. Shortly thereafter, the new group of congregants that composed the meal program began worshiping in the chapel, reinvigorating the religious space of the parish. In contrast to the strict religious teaching and practice of the previous congregation, the new group practiced a Catholicism grounded in contemporary issues of social justice. Over the next few years, members of the meal program began addressing other root causes of poverty with programs including jail ministry, refugee assistance, healthcare, and legal and employment counseling. For the following decades, the congregation remained mostly composed of those who came with the meal program, continuing to house the myriad programs and converting St. Anthony's hospital, which had faced financial difficulties, into a low-income housing complex. Although much has changed since its humble beginnings as a storefront church, St. Benedict the Moor remains a center of Catholic faith and community service over a century later.

Timeline

- 10/2/1908 Lincoln Valle, an African-American man from Chicago, brings members of the African-American community together to worship in a storefront at 274 4th St. in Milwaukee.
- June 1909 The congregation, moves to a storefront at 530 State Street in Milwaukee, dedicates the new mission chapel to the patronage of St. Benedict the Moor.
- October 1909 Holy Mass is first celebrated at the mission, and is conducted by Rev. P. Cyril Kufner, a Capuchin.
- January 1911 The Capuchin Friars of St. Francis of Assisi Church, a group of friars within the Milwaukee Archdiocese, are placed in charge of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Colored Mission.
- Winter 1911 Home at 311 9th St. purchased, congregation moved to that location around Christmas of 1911.
- 9/4/1912 St. Benedict's opens its day school for nine elementary students. The Sisters of Notre Dame serve as the school's teachers.
- 7/13/1913 Father Stephen Eckert, a Capuchin Friar from Ontario, Canada, becomes the first resident pastor of St. Benedict the Moor. Father Eckert directs the opening of St. Benedict's boarding school the following month, admitting the first two boarders.
- August 1920 Father Eckert attempts to move the school to a new location in Corliss (Sturtevant), Wisconsin. However, this attempt ultimately failed and the boarders moved back to the city of Milwaukee permanently in 1921.
- Summer 1921 The operation of the St. Benedict schools are taken over by the Dominican Sisters of Racine after the move back to Milwaukee.
- 2/16/1923 Fr. Eckert dies of pneumonia. He is replaced by Friar Philip Steffes, although had already taken much of the active responsibility the previous year.
- 1923 The current chapel is built at 10th and State Streets against the wishes of Mayor Daniel Hoan and other city officials. The chapel was funded by a large gift from Ernest Miller, the president of Miller Brewing Company at the time.
- 1924 With Ernest Miller's continued support, the mission purchases additional buildings from Marquette University, effectively spreading the "campus" over nearly two city blocks.
- 12/11/1930 Cornerstone is laid for St. Anthony Hospital, building is erected the following Year. St. Anthony serves as the first integrated hospital in the city, aimed at

helping low-income patients.

- 1939 Junior and high school classes are added with 87 students enrolled.
- 1943 Black History Month is celebrated at the school with guest speakers and an emphasis on African-American topics in the curriculum.
- 1954 St. Benedict closes its boarding school at the end of the '53-'54 school year.
- 1964 St. Benedict High School closes.
- 1967 The construction of the I43 expressway effectively cuts the elementary school grounds in half. This, along with much of the African-American community moving to the Northern and Western neighborhoods of Milwaukee, forces the elementary school to close.
- 1970 With the schools closed and parish life declining following the construction of the Freeway, weekly mass is discontinued and Br. Alex Luzi takes over as pastor during the following transition period.
- 11/13/1970 St. Benedict the Moor begins hosting their Community Meal program. The first meal serves approximately 40 people and signifies a new purpose for the parish.
- 3/28/1971 The first Eucharist occurs since the beginning of the Loaves and Fishes Program, effectively combining church activities with the meal program.
- June 1971 The Loaves and Fishes program expands, adding a number of services including job and alcohol counseling, medical services and recreational opportunities.
- 1974 The Benedict Center for Criminal Justice is established with the main goal of providing outreach and ministry to the nearby jail and detention facility. In 1978 This organization would become an independent entity, legally distinct from the parish.
- 1975 St. Benedict the Moor offers temporary housing for a number of refugee families from Southeast Asia. A similar initiative would be implemented in 1982 to house refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador.
- 8/27/1978 The first State Street Festival is held outside of St. Benedict the Moor.
- 10/7/1980 St. Anthony Hospital begins operating a weekly free-clinic to assist the homeless population in attendance at the Loaves and Fishes program.
- 1988 St. Anthony Hospital ceases regular hospital operations due to financial constraints.

- Feb. 1993 A renovation project focused on increasing accessibility is completed at St. Benedict the Moor. The project includes construction of an elevator and ramps leading to the main entrance of the chapel.
- April 1998 Serious discussions take place within the Capuchin Order regarding whether or not to close St. Benedict in response to dwindling service attendance and financial resources.
- 2002 Additional renovations of the chapel are completed, cementing the congregation's decision to maintain their location in downtown Milwaukee.
- 2018 The former St. Anthony hospital is remodeled into a low-income housing complex with 60-units. The remodel also includes a structure connecting the housing structure to the meal hall located beneath the chapel.

Annotated Bibliography

St. Benedict the Moor Parish archives

Five or six boxes of archival material related to the parish, some of which is organized by year. Includes newspapers from earliest days of parish, drafts of parish histories, school records, meal program material, and parish bulletins. Very little information between 1960 and 1970.

St. Francis of Assisi (Milwaukee) Parish archives

Approximately four boxes of material related to St. Benedict the Moor, including numerous images of the congregation, hospital, and school. Also includes some detailed records from the St. Benedict the Moor Vincentian conference and records from the St. Benedict the Moor alumni association.

Archives of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, located at Mary Mother of the Church Pastoral Center

Approximately one box of material from St. Benedict the Moor parish. Includes histories of the parish, including multiple jubilee/anniversary histories, testimonial proofs for Fr. Stephen Eckert, and information on the history of the meal program.

Avella, Stephen. *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958*. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press; 2002)

First part of Stephen Avella's thorough history of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Relevant for nationwide, archdiocese, and citywide trends. Includes a section on African-American Catholics and St. Benedict the Moor parish; places the parish school, hospital, and Vincentian Society in the archdiocesan context.

Avella, Stephen. "African American Socialization in Milwaukee: The Role of the Catholic Church." *Milwaukee History*. Autumn-Winter 1994, 70-87.

Article provides more background information about African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee, including exploration of how religious institutions like St. Benedict the Moor impacted new communities in the city.

Avella, Stephen. "The Lonely Monument at St. Benedict the Moor." *The Catholic Herald*. December 18, 2017. <https://catholicherald.org/news/local/lonely-monument-st-benedict-moor/>

Short article from Stephen Avella about the life of Fr. Stephen Eckert, his founding of St. Benedict the Moor, and his legacy within the Milwaukee Catholic community. This includes descriptions of religious devotions at St. Benedict the Moor, education at the parish schools, and connections between Eckert and Fr. James Groppi. Available online.

Bittle, Celestine N. *A Romance of Lady Poverty: The History of the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order in the United States*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1933.

Lengthy history of the Capuchins in the upper Midwest, up to 1933. Includes multiple sections on the early history of St. Benedict the Moor parish, including its founding, mostly focusing on the white clergy. Available via UWM libraries.

Geenan, Paul H. *Milwaukee's Bronzeville, 1900-1950*. Introduction by Reuben K. Harpole (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing; 2006).

Part of the *Images of America* series, this short book includes mostly images of Milwaukee's Bronzeville in the first half of the twentieth century, including many images of the campus and people St. Benedict the Moor parish, including its schools.

History of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Colored Mission. Milwaukee: 1912.

An early history of St. Benedict the Moor parish, produced in part by the parish. Includes an introduction by archbishop Messmer, receipts and letters from the parish's early years, and details of the founding of the parish. Valuable for the information and images covering the early years of St. Ben's, but also for a glimpse into the mindset of the men who founded it. Available at the UWM library.

Rummel, Leo. *History of the Catholic Church in Wisconsin*. Wisconsin State Council, Knights of Columbus. (Madison: Wisconsin State Council, Knights of Columbus; 1976).

History of the Catholic Church's actions in Wisconsin, from settlement by white Catholics to 1976. Includes brief sections on various ethnic groups, including African-Americans, as well as religious orders, including the Capuchins. Available at the UWM library.

Vietoris, John. "A Golden Opportunity for Reaping a Harvest of Souls: A History of the Ministry to African American Catholics in Milwaukee, 1908-1963." Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 2009.

A doctoral dissertation about Catholic ministry to black Catholics in Milwaukee in the early and middle twentieth century. This includes multiple chapters on St. Benedict the Moor parish, including its founding, its schools and hospital, and the impact of demographic shifts. Most sources are the white missionaries. Can access online version via UWM libraries.