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SERVING JESUS AT CHURCH AND IN COMMUNITY

by Roosevelt Gray

The LCMS has a huge opportunity to prepare, equip and deploy pastors, deaconesses, educators and other professional church workers to the African and African American communities in North America.

“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest” (JOHN 4:35).

For Deaconess Dorcel Dowdell, a quick run to the grocery store turned into an opportunity to reconnect with a woman from the local homeless shelter. “I was just making a quick trip, and she called out my name. At first I didn’t recognize her,” Dowdell said. “I had volunteered at the Sparrow’s Nest for over a year and had met her. She was relatively young, in her forties, with several health issues. Because she was so ill, she lost her house and ended up on the streets.

“Now she has an apartment and is getting her health back,” she explained. “She asked about church, and I offered to pick her up. I pick up two other ladies too. So she came to church with us Sunday, which was wonderful.”

Dowdell had been active in her church, St. Philip Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio, for many years when an elder suggested she study to become a deaconess. While working full-time as a librarian, she took classes part-time at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, from 2003–2007. She then interned from 2007–2009 at Lutheran Village at Wolf Creek in Toledo, an independent

‘By the grace of God I made it through the seminary. It was a great experience to be synodically trained, to have the firm theological foundation, and to have made pastor and deaconess friends for life.’

living and nursing home facility. She graduated in 2010.

“I was part of the first group of deaconesses in 2003. There were ten of us. I was the only African-American and I was going back to school twenty-three years after I received my master’s in library science. It was a great experience. I made friends easily to form study groups, I loved the professors, I liked staying in the dorm when I didn’t want to drive back to Toledo, and I loved the ‘high church’ of Chapel. It was wonderful. And when the going

got tough and I wondered why I was there, the Holy Spirit was right there to see me through,” said Dowdell.

Although St. Philip is a small congregation, “we have mighty mission works in our hearts,” she said. With the direction of the Rev. Mark Hill, Dowdell oversees the church’s group of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League; parish education, which includes Bible studies and Vacation Bible School; the Toledo Blind Outreach Center and their programs; special services; Thrivent projects; mission outreach projects and programs; hospital and home visitation; and serves as secretary for

the church council. In addition, she volunteers in the community.

In January, thanks to a mission outreach grant, St. Philip Lutheran Church was able to present several programs and services to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. In April, with the coordinators of the Toledo Blind Outreach Center (TBOC), which meets at St. Philip monthly, they hosted the Rev. David Andrus, a blind pastor from St. Louis, who presented a workshop for volunteers, members and participants of TBOC.

Another outreach effort this summer was “Hope Experience,” a parking lot service for the community. “We went door to door leaving our announcements, placed an ad in the paper, had a guest pastor from Detroit, and a jazz-gospel band, all in an effort to share the gospel with our neighbors. We had a gathering of fifty people, several of whom were visitors,” Dowdell said.

Dowdell would love to recruit more African-American women to become deaconesses. “There is so much work to be done in the Kingdom. It’s hard work and you must be completely dedicated to the Lord and the work he has laid out for you to do, but it is so worthwhile.

“I’m grateful the Holy Spirit led this elder to approach me, and by the grace of God I made it through the seminary. It was a great experience to be synodically trained, to have the firm theological foundation, and to have made pastor and deaconess friends for life,” she said.

The 2015 U.S. Census Bureau estimated that there are 46,282,080 African Americans in the United States, meaning that 14.3% of the total American population of 321.4 million is black. This includes those who identify as “Black only” and as “Black in combination with another race.” The “Black only” category by itself totaled 42.6 million African Americans, or 13.3% of the total population.

What a great opportunity for the LCMS to prepare, equip and deploy pastors, deaconesses, educators and other professional church workers to the African and African American communities in North America, especially under the new *Mission Field: USA initiative*.

“And he said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (LUKE 10:2).

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