

## A Beacon for the Community

by Megan K. Mertz

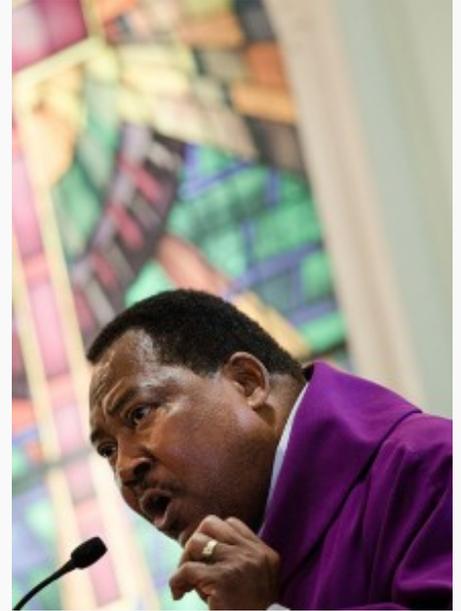
When the Rev. Ulmer Marshall came to Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mobile, Ala., in 1973, no one expected him to stay long. The neighborhood, Trinity Gardens, was in a downward spiral. There were problems with drugs and crime. Many of the streets weren't even paved. Trinity Gardens was like a "dirty word," Marshall said.

### To the Streets

But Marshall and other concerned church and community members were determined. They coordinated a neighborhood watch program and worked with the police to drive out the dealers selling drugs on the street corners.

"We started standing on the corners. We thought, we have just as much right to stand on the corners as the drug dealers. They would go to another, and we would move too," Marshall recalled. "It was a dangerous ministry, but we had the Lord on our side."

Eventually, the drug dealers left, and community leaders turned their attention to cleaning up urban blight, rebuilding the neighborhood and caring for residents.



The Rev. Ulmer Marshall preaches at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mobile, Ala.

*"A church is in a community to serve that community. It's our job." — Rev. Ulmer Marshall, pastor, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church and Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mobile, Ala.*

In the 1980s, Trinity started a hot lunch program for senior citizens. The program regularly drew some 85 seniors before it was moved from the church to a newly built community center.

In 1997, Trinity member Leevones Fisher founded the Bay Area Women's Coalition, a nonprofit committed to improving housing and educational opportunities in Trinity Gardens. Since its establishment, the coalition has organized the planting of 4,000 trees and helped rescue more than 60 houses from dilapidation and foreclosure.

If the owner of a run-down building can't be identified, the organization works with the city to tear it down so a new house can be built. Church members have pitched in to build 12 houses in the area for low-income families.

"Before, it was a disaster ... with houses collapsing in, people still living in them," Fisher said. "We still have people who ... need help ... but the good part about it is the people act like they have some sense of hope now."

The congregation continues to seek new ways to serve the community.

One summer several years ago, Trinity received a grant to pay approximately 25 young men to mow grass and do other tasks to clean up the community. Marshall's only requirement was that the youth attend Sunday school at Trinity every week.

"We had one of our young men teach them about starting a business," Marshall said, "and we got to tell them about the love of God."

For the past 17 years, Trinity has held the Summer Enrichment Program for community children. Grant money from the state enables Trinity to hire teachers and provide meals to students during the free summer school. Last year, 186 children attended.

In February 2014, the church held a job-training seminar to help Mobile's young people get jobs with new companies moving into the area. The event included information about how to dress for job interviews and fill out applications.

Even though Trinity did not advertise the event, more than 200 people showed up.

"A church is in a community to serve that community," Marshall said. "It's our job."

## **A Legacy of Education**

Over the years, Marshall has fought to keep Trinity's day school open, despite times of struggle during its 62-year history.

As a historically black Lutheran school in Alabama, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran School has special significance for Black Ministry in the Synod.

In 1877, just 30 years after the Synod was formed, the LCMS officially began outreach to the country's black population when the first missionary was sent among them to proclaim the Gospel. That missionary, the Rev. J.F. Doeshcher, established the first black Lutheran church and school in Little Rock, Ark.

Almost 40 years later, in 1916, the Synod partnered with Dr. Rosa Young, an advocate of education for African-Americans in the South, to help start 37 schools in the Black Belt. Under her initiative, Concordia College Alabama, Selma, Ala., was founded in 1922. It continues to hold the distinction as the nation's only historically black Lutheran college.

Today, the LCMS works with about 258 congregations in Black Ministry that serve blacks and African immigrants in a variety of ways, including through education, mercy projects, and Word and Sacrament ministry.

Marshall says Trinity's school — the only one of the 37 schools started under Young's initiative that remains in operation — has been one of its "greatest outreaches," noting that thousands of people have come through its doors. It currently has about 130 students in preschool through seventh grade.

This year, Marshall and other leaders will officially change the name of the school to the Rosa Young Academy to celebrate its historical significance.

The school also has the distinction of having a public library branch on its campus.

When Trinity expanded its school facilities in 2005, leaders saw the opportunity to partner with the public library to



Preschooler LaTerry Kennedy prays during school at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran School.

add a branch for the Trinity Gardens community. In exchange for providing the space, Mobile Public Library provides computers and staff.

This unique partnership brings people to the church property every day and “it gives our children access to a public library right here on our campus,” Marshall said.

In the future, the Rev. Roosevelt Gray Jr., director of LCMS Black Ministry, hopes to use Trinity’s historic school as a model for starting new schools and revitalizing existing ones that can, in turn, renew black churches and communities.

“Word and Sacrament ministries will come out of these educational opportunities,” Gray said.

## The Life of the Church

Keeping people engaged is a priority for Marshall, who shepherds Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Point Clear, Ala., in addition to Trinity’s 350 members.

Trinity offers numerous opportunities for every age group. The youth and men’s groups go into the community to help neighbors. They clean up yards, paint houses and build wheelchair ramps. Each year, Trinity also hosts at least two church groups that come to volunteer in the community.

In addition, Trinity has the largest Lutheran Women’s Missionary League in the LCMS Southern District. One of the two groups is specifically for younger women.

The church celebrates its life in Christ during worship each week. There are four different choirs, including a Gospel choir, and several different dance groups that praise God through movement.

During his 40 years of service, Marshall has served the Synod locally, regionally and nationally. He has the distinction of being the first black member of the Synod’s Board of Directors and the LCMS Commission on Worship. He also has served as second vice-president of the LCMS Southern District and as chairman of the Black Clergy Caucus, among his many roles.

To recognize Marshall’s many years of service, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind., awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in May.

Of Marshall, Gray said: “He has been a steady foundation of spiritual stability, hope and optimism in serving Trinity and the LCMS through some of the most challenging times of change in our church, country and his community. His pastoral leadership and longevity have been a model for how pastoral ministry ... and visionary leadership can positively affect the mission and ministry of a local congregation serving its community with the Gospel of Christ.”

Although Trinity’s previous pastors came and went, Marshall has dedicated the last 40 years to building up the church and community. Now, he said, he’s proud to say he’s part of the Trinity Gardens community, despite its rough past.

“Getting involved in the community and seeing the great needs and seeing the progress we’ve made over the years, that’s one of the things that’s kept me here,” he said. “Our church has been a beacon for this community.”

## Learn more about LCMS Black Ministry:

- [www.lcms.org/blackministry](http://www.lcms.org/blackministry)



Students hug teacher Jonathan Clausell near the end of class at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran School.

- <http://blogs.lcms.org/2014/commentary-black-history-month>

## **LCMS Black Ministry**

In November 2013, the Rev. Roosevelt Gray Jr. took the helm of LCMS Black Ministry as its director. Gray says that his priority is to revitalize “congregations in black ministry as 21st-century mission and ministry outposts for their communities by providing training resources in strategic planning, community outreach and collaborative partnership.”

Going forward, the ministry plans to focus on:

- Informing, educating and motivating LCMS members and districts to plant new congregations;
- Providing leadership and training opportunities through conferences and workshops;
- Revitalizing less-engaged and declining congregations to refocus on Christ’s mission;
- Supporting and strengthening school ministries and assisting in the accreditation process; and
- Maintaining a scholarship fund for urban children in need.

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