

Church History  
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**Alabama Luther Academy:**  
**a brief history of the Synodical Conference years 1922-1962**  
by Aaron Robinson

There now sits in Selma, Alabama a school called Concordia College which is part of the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod's school system. This school has a history that is so much more important than its present status as just another one of many colleges. It was at one time a unique institution,<sup>a</sup> rarity. Before we look at the history of this institution of higher learning we need to briefly look at the history of the people that it was to serve.

Early in the history of the New World, the Americas, the first slaveship landed. African men and women were sold and forced into slave labor. In a nation that was known for its freedom that was an enormous paradox. The question of how or why this happened is simple, sin. Greed, lack of love for fellowman, and misinterpretation of God's Word led to the establishment and also sustenance of the cruel institution of slavery. The Black Man was held captive in the United States from that time until 1863. In 1863 slavery was officially abolished by order of the president of the United States. Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This is a monumental event in the history of Blacks in America. It declared Blacks free but what it couldn't do is declare them equal. Whites still considered and treated Blacks as inferior both in society and in churches. After the shameful period of history that allowed slavery to exist and flourish came segregation. There was segregation in the workplace, at the water cooler, in bathrooms and in churches. Christian men and women were following the same rules as society. Thus the paradox of the orthodox was continued.

The paradox of the orthodox is that although they brought a message of freedom they allowed and even in some places owned slaves. "While in the planning stage, the colonial thrust was supposed to reject slavery... But that did not prevent the Swedish congregation at Christiana from selling part of its church land in 1719 to purchase a Negro female slave for service in the parsonage."<sup>1</sup> This paradox continued with the segregation of

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff G. Johnson, Black Christians: The Untold Story (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 23.

schools. In spite of this paradox God still worked faith in many of the slaves and former slaves through the Gospel message.

One such person was a young lady named Rosa Young. Rosa Young was a Methodist teacher living in Alabama. After teaching elementary grades she desired “to establish a school that would give the youth of my race a real, true, threefold education: of the head, the hand, and the heart.”<sup>2</sup> She sought to do this in her hometown of Rosebud, Alabama. In 1912 with the support of both Blacks and Whites in the area it happened that Rosebud Literary and Industrial School for the benefit of the destitute, common people was organized. In 1914 the school was in financial trouble and the other teacher left for a better paying position. The Methodist Church, which she had belonged to was unable to support the school. She wrote to Dr. Booker T. Washington for assistance. He was unable to help monetarily but he did advise her to contact the Board of Colored Missions of the Lutheran Church. She did and that is how the Lutheran Church came to be in Alabama.

### **The Beginning**

The <sup>h</sup>History of Blacks in America is important as we look at a school founded during that time of turmoil in the deep south. It is also important to know of the mission work in Alabama to explain why we even put a school for Blacks in the deep south. It seems that Rosa Young’s dream to have a high school for Blacks was not just her dream. The mission work in Alabama was very successful. In the 1919 proceedings the Alabama Conference petitioned the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod for a high school teacher training program. It was to consist of a high school plus one year of college. In 1920 it was reported that there were a large number of communicant members. It was also reported that there were 11 schools teaching almost 9,000 children. It is because of the enormous amount of children that in “the Alabama area our workers desire a high school,

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<sup>2</sup> Rosa Young, Light in the Dark Belt (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 59.

to be able to trained with a strong course of this area.”<sup>3</sup> It was with this report given at the convention in Milwaukee, WI that the idea for a high school in Alabama was brought to the ears of the members of the Synodical Conference. It was resolved to set up a committee to look into the matter and report its findings to the Synodical Conference. The resolution was adopted and it was determined that a high school should indeed be established in Alabama with the purpose of training young Black men and women for the ministry.

“Two years ago the commission was instructed, as resolved already in 1920, to begin with the construction of a higher learning institute at the blooming field of Alabama... the faculty should consist of colored teachers, and employed missionaries Otto Lynn(1922) and Paul Lehman(1923) as professors.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1922 ten girls were instructed in Selma, Alabama. Alabama Luther Academy was established. It was also reported that in the next year the enrollment doubled forcing them to rent another place to house the young girls. Something that should not be overlooked is the make up of the faculty of this new institution. It is of some note that it was part of the design of the mission board to make sure there was a staff that consisted entirely of Black teachers. The school went through a number of minor changes but stayed pretty much the same for almost four decades. It should also be noted that this was the second of three institutions established to serve Blacks. The other preparatory school was in Louisiana but didn't last long and the other was Immanuel Lutheran College.

### **The 1920's**

Just as history shows that America seemed to thrive during this decade, <sup>+</sup>The missions in Alabama were also thriving. Alabama Luther College was thriving as well.

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<sup>3</sup> “Proceedings of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference” (St. Louis, MO) 120.  
Tr: by Ben Berger

<sup>4</sup> Napoleon OH. the 29th convention on August 20-26, 1924.

The school seemed to be on a steady incline in both the enrollment and its future as a training school for Blacks into the ministry. "Its primary purpose was to prepare young women for the church's mission schools. If there was room young men might attend, provided they intended to prepare themselves for the ministry."<sup>5</sup> The official title for the school in 1923 was the Teachers Training School at Selma Alabama. The enrollment included 20 girls and 2 boys. They were taught by 3 Black men and one Black woman. In 1926, one year after the purchase of 13 acres, <sup>the school named</sup> it was called Alabama Luther College. It added 1 more Black male professor and it had 43 students. It also added an elementary school on the same campus. There was an increase in enrollment every year except for 1928 until 1932. The school received support from both blacks and whites in the Alabama Field as well as throughout the Synodical Conference. There were some factors in our society that Dr. Dickinson notes may have contributed to this growth. "This could have been partly due to the effects of the Marcus Garvey movement,... It could also have been due to the Harlem Renaissance."<sup>6</sup>

*Explain these terms*

### The 1930's

Just as the Church doesn't live in a vacuum neither did Alabama Luther College. Excited by the great success the mission had in the 20's the resolutions came from the mission board to make additions and financial commitments at both Alabama Luther and Immanuel Lutheran. The 30's were a tumultuous time for the school in Selma. Much of the turmoil was due to the fact that country was going through the depression. In 1932 the enrollment at Alabama Luther dipped to 13 students. The churches that had previously been able to send funds to support the school were now unable to do so with any regularity. Due to the economic conditions the school was reduced to a preparatory school for Immanuel Lutheran College in Greensborough, North Carolina. This had an effect not

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff G. Johnson, Black Christians: The Untold Story (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 170.

<sup>6</sup> Richard C. Dickinson, Roses and Thorns (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 162.

only on the school in Alabama but on the other schools of higher education for Blacks supported by the Synodical Conference.

“The missionary board presented the following resolutions:

- (a) To discontinue Luther Preparatory School at New Orleans at the close of the past year;
- (b) That Alabama Luther College serve as a girl’s preparatory school for Immanuel Lutheran College;
- (c) That the work at Immanuel Lutheran College continue in its present form.”<sup>7</sup>

These resolutions were adopted. The following year Alabama Luther College appears in the Synod reports as Alabama Junior High School as it only had 8th and 9th grades. However, it still had 4 professors. Alabama Luther had served as a very effective feeder school for the Immanuel Lutheran College. A large part of that was due to the fact that the Alabama Field was saturated with Lutheran churches and schools.

“The records show that Alabama has 944,834 Negroes; of these 2,488 are Lutherans. As one travels through the state of Alabama, the Lutheran chapels in their uniformity of construction and paint stand out very conspicuously... We have thirty-three organized congregations in this field.

Much has been done in the past years and opportunities for more work are unlimited.”<sup>8</sup>

These congregations supported the school as long <sup>as</sup> <sup>and</sup> <sup>as</sup> much <sup>as</sup> they were able. The Synodical Conference upon recovering from the depression and seeing the drastic decline in

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff G. Johnson, Black Christians: The Untold Story (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 170.

<sup>8</sup> “Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Convention of the evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America” (1936) 89.

candidates for the ministry began rethinking its decision as early as 1936 to downsize the schools.

### The 1940's

The decade began going in the opposite direction for the training of Blacks for the ministry. No longer were they taking away classes because of funding but they recognized the tremendous job that was being done at the Alabama Lutheran College. "By the spring of 1940, this institution had been restored to full high school status, and as such was an excellent feeder school for Immanuel Lutheran College, in Greensboro, North Carolina."<sup>9</sup> Four years after making Alabama a full high school there were efforts made to close down Immanuel. It seems as though, already, the Synodical Conference was faced with the thought of integration. "After a careful study of the history and the development of Immanuel Lutheran College at Greensbor, North Carolina; of the net visible results and of the cost involved to train men and women for the work in Negro missions; of the decline enrollment of the non-Lutherans... we have come to the firm conviction that we can no longer justify the continuance of Immanuel Lutheran College." They were not just going to abandon the instruction of Blacks for the Pastoral ministry. The plan of that committee was to integrate them into the student body of the number of other colleges and Seminaries that the were supported by the Synodical Conference. It was<sup>A</sup> also there hope that those wishing to go into the teaching ministry continue to attend Alabama Lutheran Academy.

Fortunately,<sup>the</sup> resolution was not passed.<sup>It was</sup> Fortunate, not because the integration of the schools would be a bad thing but that the integration without the option of going to a place familiar and close to the many students that came from the South,<sup>would make it difficult for many students</sup> The Seminary in Greensboro survived and Alabama Luther continued to be a feeder, training young men for Seminary training. It is of note that at this time there seemed be a number of problems out in the field. It is reported in 1944 that "since 1928 fewer than twenty Negro pastors left

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<sup>9</sup> Richard C. Dickinson, Roses and Thorns (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 165.

the service of the Church. Ten were dismissed for cause- inactivity, inefficiency, debts, gross neglect of duty, immorality, domestic difficulties. Others left to increase their income.”<sup>10</sup> Even though the report lists many negatives there seemed to be a large number that left because of unsatisfactory pay or working conditions. Dickinson believes that the condition of the men being sent out was very effective in fostering a negative perception of ministry. “The Black student was trained to work in Negro missions. He was also restricted in his placement to this segment of the church’s work program.”<sup>11</sup>

“Traditionally, the Black workers were relegated to the poorer congregations.”<sup>12</sup> This negative view of ministry also affected the enrollment of Alabama Luther.

### **The 1950's**

The decade looked promising as the Synodical Conference had promised a “much-needed Administration-Library building”. During this decade Alabama Luther reached the highest enrollment. They had 130 students in 1952 then topped that by one in 1955. Four years after the effort to integrate the college and seminary students for financial reasons, the Supreme Court sought to do it by law. The resolution reads as though it is a reluctant change that has been forced upon them. The first part of the resolution speaks of man’s humanity to man being a reason for the mistreatment of Blacks in a America. The second part states how the Supreme Court declared segregation unconstitutional. Lastly the point is made that integration is in keeping with Christian principles. Without saying that the Synodical Conference itself was wrong in segregating the schools the following resolution was made.

“That we encourage the Lutheran Synodical Conference  
through its Mission Board, to make it clear that its two institutions

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<sup>10</sup> “Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America” (1944) 63.

<sup>11</sup> Richard C. Dickinson, Roses and Thorns (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 169.

<sup>12</sup> Richard C. Dickinson, Roses and Thorns (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 169.



of higher learning, Immanuel Lutheran College of Greensboro, N.C., and Alabama Lutheran Academy and College at Selma, Ala., are intended for all students without racial considerations.”<sup>13</sup>

Alabama Lutheran Academy and College was still attempting to fulfill its goal as a feeder to the Seminary and the training of Lutheran teachers. It was reported at the Forty-Third Convention that “only one of its 129 students is a non-Lutheran. It is also noted at that same convention that the student body was comprised of young people not just from Alabama but also from Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Ohio, and California.

At the next convention in 1956 the resolution was made to do a study of both Alabama Luther and Immanuel Lutheran. There are several reasons mentioned for such a study. The first is somewhat surprising. “The two schools for higher education... are in more than one respect inadequate.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout the proceedings and reports there have mention of facilities needing to be upgraded but never the education that the students received. Quite the contrary, <sup>usually</sup> the superb and thorough indoctrination that the students got at both institutions. *verb?* The second reason stems from Supreme Court decisions. The third reason is the societies’ changing view concerning the segregation of the races. The study stated very clearly that schools should both be allowed to continue work but that the necessary changes be made. The schools were recognized as being in different settings than the other Synodical schools. It also recognized that in this case like most across our nation separate was not equal. “In 1956 the Academy is still without new buildings. We send our Negro children to school under conditions

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<sup>13</sup>“Proceedings of the Forty-Third Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference” (1954) 153.

<sup>14</sup> Proceedings of the Forty-Forth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference” (1956) 115.

which we would never tolerate in any of our Synodical institutions.”<sup>15</sup> It was also recognized that there shouldn't be a difference in the facilities.

In 1958 an evaluation of the two schools was asked for and that the findings be reported on at the next Synodical Convention. Alabama Lutheran Academy-College survived but Immanuel Lutheran did not. The study came back with a number of options. In 1961 Immanuel Lutheran College no longer existed. The only institute of higher learning established for the education of Blacks that remained was the Alabama Lutheran Academy-and College. After the break because of doctrinal matters was under way and about to come to an end it was resolved to give the responsibility of the Alabama Field as well as Alabama Luther Academy-College to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. “The transfer of the administration and the property at Selma, Alabama was completed on January 29, 1962.

*What were they?*

### **Conclusion**

Alabama Lutheran Academy since its founding was meant to train young men and women for service in the Lutheran Church. It accomplished its goal as a Normal school and as a feeder school for Immanuel Lutheran. The community of churches supported the school with money and provided it with students. It is at that period of time that the Lutheran Church saw the largest number of Black pastors that it has ever seen. That is due, in no small part, to the success of Alabama Lutheran Academy. It is appears that those type of numbers of Black pastors will be seen for some years. ~~That is due, in no small part, to the success of Alabama Lutheran Academy.~~

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<sup>15</sup> Proceedings of the Forty-Forth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference” (1956) 119.

1. Jeff G. Johnson, Black Christians: The Untold Story (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) 23.
2. Rosa Young, Light in the Dark Belt (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991)
3. "Proceedings of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference" (St. Louis, MO)
4. Napoleon OH. the 29th convention on August 20-26
5. Richard C. Dickinson, Roses and Thorns (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991)
6. Jeff G. Johnson, Black Christians: The Untold Story (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991).
7. "Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Convention of the evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America" (1936)
8. "Proceedings of the Thirty-Eight Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America" (1944)
9. "Proceedings of the Forty-Third Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference" (1954)
10. "Proceedings of the Forty-Forth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference" (1956)

Year	Name	Enrollment	Staff	
1922	Alabama Lutheran Academy	10	3	
1923	Teacher's Training School at Selma Alabama	22	3	
1924	Alabama Lutheran Academy		4	
1925	Alabama Lutheran Academy	41	4	
1926	Alabama Lutheran Academy	43	5	
1927	Alabama Lutheran Academy	49		
1828	Alabama Lutheran Academy	39	5	
1929	Alabama Lutheran Academy	48	6	
1930	Alabama Lutheran Academy		5	
1931	Alabama Lutheran Academy	53	2	
1932	Alabama Lutheran Academy	13	4	
1933	Alabama Junior High School	78	4	
1934	Alabama Lutheran Academy	48	4	
1935	Alabama Lutheran Academy	26	3	
1936	Alabama Lutheran College	27		
1937	Alabama Lutheran Academy	63	4	
1938	Alabama Lutheran Academy	89	5	
1939	Alabama Lutheran Academy	74	4	
1940	Alabama Lutheran Academy	35	4	
1941	Alabama Lutheran Academy	36	3	
1942	Alabama Lutheran Academy	104	5	
1943	Alabama Lutheran Academy	116	5	
1944	Alabama Lutheran Academy	113		
1945	Alabama Lutheran Academy	105	7	
1946	Alabama Lutheran Academy	72	6	
1947	Alabama Lutheran Academy	84	8	
1948	Alabama Lutheran Academy	86	7	
1949	Alabama Lutheran Academy	114		
1950	Alabama Lutheran Academy	115	8	
1951	Alabama Lutheran Academy	130	8	
1952	Alabama Lutheran Academy	112	12	
1953	<b>no info found in Statistical Yearbook</b>			
1954	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	120	9	
1955	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	131	9	
1956	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	124	9	
1957	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	101	10	
1958	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	102	11	
1959	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	104	12	
1960	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	134	13	
1961	Alabama Lutheran Academy - College	139	14	
1962		128	14	