

A Light in the City for 100 Years: St. Benedict the Moor Community

For 100 years, St Benedict the Moor has affirmed and welcomed a rich variety of persons, especially the disenfranchised of our society. This welcoming of the unwelcome permeates the diversity of ministries which grew and shifted over the years.

In 1908 St Benedict's primary purpose was establishing a mission to serve the growing number of African Americans living in Milwaukee. Inspired by a Black Catholic layman from Chicago, the Capuchin Franciscan community eventually took responsibility for its growth.

A boarding elementary and high school, providing education and academic excellence to young African Americans was established. With the collaboration of Dominican and Notre Dame Sisters, the school grew and helped shape the lives of many youth producing leaders for the Milwaukee community and beyond. St. Anthony Hospital was added to welcome Black doctors and nurses unwelcome to practice in other institutions in the city. In the 60's, due to social changes and expressway development, the school closed and later the hospital. An Alumni Association exists to this day to remember this wonderful part of St. Benedict's story. The Association continues to support the education of African American students through financial help.

After a transition period, in 1970 a community meal began supplying food on a daily basis to the homeless and hungry of the city. From its beginning it involved volunteers from all parts of the metropolitan area and beyond in preparing, delivering and serving the food. They come from diverse faiths, cultures and political leanings. Approximately 100,000 meals are now served annually.

In response to the health needs of the guests at the meal, a clinic grew out of a small closet in the back of the hall to a fully equipped and staffed clinic sponsored by Colombia/St. Mary's Hospital of Milwaukee. It has been giving quality health care to the homeless and uninsured population for over twenty-eight years.

A jail chaplaincy ministry is also part of the story. It grew in response to the brothers and sisters incarcerated just across the street. St. Ben's is a meeting place and resource for many who provide for the physical, spiritual and psychological needs of Milwaukee County inmates.

The one constant over the years permeating these ministries has been the affirmation given to all the sisters and brothers who gather at what is affectionately called St Ben's. People outside the mainstream of society are welcomed daily to find some rest and a little bit of home. The spirit of St. Francis is also at home here.



October 2, 1908 – Captain Lincoln Valle, an African-American layman, brought the small, Catholic African-American community together in worship in a store front in the African-American section of Milwaukee at 274 4th Street.

June 1909 – The store-front mission, now housed at 530 State Street, is formally dedicated under the patronage of St. Benedict the Moor.



November 18, 1911 – Archbishop grants the Capuchins permission to solicit alms and funds for St. Benedict's. The Brothers raise over \$1000.

1911 – The parish records over 30 baptisms during the year. St. Ben's celebrates its first marriage, between Samuel Bryant and Mamie Pettis.

September 4, 1912 – St. Benedict's, the first African-American mission elementary school in the country, opens its doors to nine students.

January, 1913 – Fr. Stephen Eckert becomes the mission's first resident pastor.



September 2, 1913 – The school year opens with twelve new students and two boarders.

September 7, 1920 – Fr. Stephen and 120 students move with the school to Corliss (now Sturtevant), a Dominican Sister site. The Sisters are able to sell the site in February 1921, and the Capuchins decide against buying it. The school moves back to Milwaukee then.

1922 – The school serves 74 boarders and 14 day students.



1923 – Excavation begins at 10th and State Streets for a new chapel for the mission, against the wishes of the mayor and city officials. Ernest Miller of Miller Brewing Company promises \$50,000 towards construction costs.



February 16, 1923 – Fr. Stephen dies one month after becoming ill.

1923 – St. Benedict pupils “storm heaven” with prayers in honor of Fr. Stephen Eckert for a much-needed teacher; within 24 hours, seven applications are made.

1927 – St. Benedict's records the largest number of baptisms to date: 62 children from the school, 29 children from the Catholic Instruction League, and three adults.

1930 – 60 children celebrate First Holy Communion.

1937 – The school reports 177 boys, 136 girls, 12 Dominican Sister teachers and 3 lay teachers.

1939 – Junior and senior high school classes are added with 87 students. Half of the 285 children in the grade school are boarders. The first issue of *Flashes*, the high school newspaper, appears.

1940 – The first high school senior class graduates: Helen Clinton, Richard Bowen, and Wayne Williams. St. Benedict High School becomes a member of the Milwaukee Catholic Conference Basketball League.



1941 – There are over 1300 parishioners registered with St. Ben's. St. Benedict High School is admitted to the Milwaukee Catholic Conference in football.



1945 – Mr. Charles Madison, coach and faculty member, teaches “Negro Literature,” the first such course in the nation.

1946 – Frank Holton, senior, wins the *Milwaukee Sentinel* Andrew Jackson Oratorical Contest. He is the first African-American to do so. Notre Dame Sisters take over from the Dominican Sisters in supervising the dormitories.



1947 – St. Benedict Glee Club broadcasts a half hour of spirituals and Christmas songs on radio station WFYT.



1948 – Fr. Stephen Eckert is exhumed from Calvary Cemetery and reburied in the courtyard between the St. Anthony's hospital and the church.

1953 – Students George C. Sims, Bonnie Faye Jones, Joyce Gleaton and Iffidian Davis receive meritorious award from the Knights of Columbus for essays they had written.

1954 – The boarding school of St. Benedict's closes at the end of the '53-'54 school year. Three hundred sixty students enroll for the fall of '54 despite the close of the boarding school.

1964 – St. Benedict high school closes.

1967 – I43 expressway development cuts elementary school grounds in half and the school is forced to close.

1970 – A wrecking ball is taken to the school-convent complex.



Following the St. Benedict school closing and the construction of the I42 freeway, which cut St. Ben's neighborhood in half, parish life steadily declined. Weekly mass was discontinued and Br. Alex Luzi was brought to St. Ben's to give the parish a “proper burial.”



Simultaneously, an effort to feed Milwaukee's hungry was looking for a home. In the 1960s, Mike and Nettie Cullen founded a Catholic Worker House in order to offer meals and hospitality to the hungry. The need grew and the meal moved to Casa Maria on 21st Street and Highland. The numbers coming to the meal continued to grow, and the Cullens moved from place to place until a larger, more permanent home for the meal was needed.

November 13, 1970 - St. Benedict the Moor begins hosting the Community Meal, called Operation Loaves and Fishes. Br. Alex Luzi is Capuchin in charge, and approximately 40 guests are served. Housing the Meal brings new life and purpose to the parish.

March 12, 1971 - "Good News" newsletter about the community meal distributes its first issue. The May issue recognizes the need for the meal to expand services to the guests to include job and alcohol counseling, medical services, and recreation.

1972 – Emily Showalter, friend of the community meal, dubs the St. Ben’s community A Wildlife Refuge in a letter she wrote for “Good News.”



January, 1973 – The meal hall remains open until 10 p.m. for guests to enjoy entertainment and socialization. Bingo is a favorite game.

1974 – Concerned over the increasing famine in the Sub-Saharan, St. Ben’s decides to commit all donations to the church collection and guest contributions to the meal to relief efforts. The meal guests contribute \$362.21 for their hungry brothers and sisters.

1975 – Since the Community Meal moved to St. Ben’s in 1970, volunteers served over 81,000 meals.

1977 – Br. Steven Gliko succeeds Br. Austin Schlaefer as Community Meal director.



1978 – The Community Meal sponsors State Street Festival, a neighborhood celebration designed to give the poor an opportunity to enjoy a summer festival like those around the city that they may not be able to afford. There are no costs and no entry fees for those who attend. Revelers enjoy brats, potato chips, corn on the cob, games, dancing and live music. Also in 1978, Fr. Alex leaves St. Ben’s for other ministry.

March 21, 1979 – Three Italian students from Rome visit the meal along with Abp. Rembert Weakland, Archbishop of Milwaukee. Hospitality ministers earn special designation as those who assure that guests are treated with the values of human touch, respect, and hospitality.



Tom

November 9, 1980 – The Community Meal celebrates its 10th anniversary at St. Ben’s with a celebration mass at St. Ben’s. Tom Plakut replaces Dean Lex as Meal coordinator.



1981- "Good News" reports that there are 4,500 individuals and families involved in the sponsoring groups and over 33 hospitality ministers.

April 11, 1982 – The *Milwaukee Journal* article "A Local Miracle of Loaves and Fishes" reports, "When you meet him at St. Ben’s rectory, Fr Steven Gliko may be wearing bib overalls, leather boots and a loud T shirt. He is a young, solidly built man with a rump of unruly hair and a quick mind... Gliko supervises this sprawling meal program, keeps track of sponsors and volunteers, and puts contributed dollars where they’ll help most."

1983 – Horace Lee replaces Elisha Henry as Meal assistant manager.
The Meal begins ordering paper products, coffee and other food items in bulk.



1985 – Br. Joel Frank becomes director of the Community Meal.

1987 – Carol Sejda coordinates a volunteer picnic.

February 8, 1988 – Then Governor Tommy Thompson visits the Community Meal and asks how he can help. He is told that he can support a bill providing more jobs and adequate health care and low-income housing. The first Community Meal calendar is published, with proceeds going to the Meal.

1989 – Lamont Winfert wins the contest to describe in ten words or less the image of the Meal with these words: “Where the need is shared and the love is felt.”

1990 – Tom Plakut and Horace Lee become co-directors of the meal. Guests average 420 each night. Over 70 sponsor groups prepare and serve the meal, and more than 4,000 donors provide food and monetary support.

1991 – Staff create a volunteer handbook.

1992 – The Meal begins use of a new category of volunteer, the “Blue Shirts.” These volunteers are easily recognizable to guests and volunteers and provide safety, security and hospitality to all involved in the Meal. The Meal takes seriously its recycling efforts and reduces over time the need for three dumpsters per week to just one.



1993 – Br. Kent Bauer replaces Br. Joel as Meal coordinator.

1994 – The Meal hosts an art show over Labor Day weekend with the works of John August Swanson. All proceeds go to the Meal. T-shirts and sweatshirts with the St. Ben’s logo are also sold.

1995 – Loaves and Fishes celebrates its 25th year at St. Ben’s. In a letter to the parish commemorating the occasion, Mike Cullen writes, “In order to do this work, as you probably know, after 25 years of history, one needs more than human resources to really serve on a programme like this, one needs to have a spiritual life, an interior life to work from – then the work will not be a JOB but a JOY.” Then Milwaukee County Executive F. Thomas Ament declares November 13, 1995, to be St. Benedict the Moor Community Meal Day.

1997 – The St. Ben’s basketball team played 11 games January through March in the Athletes in Recovery League. Their record was four wins and seven losses.



April 17, 1999 – The fourth annual Walk-a-Mile-in-My-Shoes fundraising and awareness raising walk takes place with sponsorship by St. Ben’s Community Meal, The Guest House, and The Open Gate.

December 5, 2000 – Sixty guests enjoy a concert following the meal. Kenneth Marincel performed classical music and a few original compositions. Guests asked if the Meal would offer concerts again in the future.

2001 – The Meal raises \$28,954.19 working 33 events at the Bradley Center concession stands. One hundred twenty four people filled the 609 volunteer positions with 55 people working three or more times.

July 10-August 2, 2002 – St. Ben’s Community Building Committee holds an art academy for children.

2004 – A total of 110,381 meals are served for an average of 378 per meal.

2006 – The Community Meal serves its one millionth guest.

2007 – Gene Le Boeuf and Don Witt, both retired, replace all of the windows on the second floor of the friar’s residence and Parish/Meal offices. The Milwaukee Bucks recognize the Community Meal as its first Hometown Hero.



The story of the St. Ben’s Clinic for the Homeless begins with St. Anthony’s hospital.

May 10, 1931 – A 42 bed hospital dedicated to St. Anthony opens, becoming the first integrated hospital in Milwaukee.

1931 – 1937 – St. Anthony’s provides \$48,721.83 in free service as part of St. Ben’s mission.

1937 – St. Anthony’s reports 1,697 admissions, 56 deaths, and 232 attending doctors.

1954 – Dr. John Maxwell is elected as chief of staff and becomes the first Black chief of staff in Wisconsin.

October, 1980 – Two registered nurses with St. Anthony Hospital begin a nurse-managed clinic to serve the homeless from St. Ben’s Community Meal. They were originally open one evening a week and worked out of a large closet. Their goal was to get to know the homeless who frequently appeared in crisis at St. Anthony’s emergency room. In turn, they would provide preventative care and education as well as follow-up care to those seen at the hospital.

1985 – The clinic receives the Robert Wood Johnson/Pew Charitable Trust grant.

1987 – The clinic receives Federal Health Care for the Homeless funds.

1989 – St. Mary’s Hospital begins sponsorship of the clinic with the bankruptcy of St. Anthony’s hospital. The clinic moves into its current space at 1027 N. 9th St. to allow for three rooms, including an exam room.

1993 – The clinic develops a mission statement that restates the clinic’s commitment to serving the homeless, especially those with mental illness and chemical dependency, and reinforces the clinic’s goal of providing hospitality and respect as well as quality health care.

1995 – The clinic expands to the entire first floor of 1027, providing more exam rooms. Medical and social service encounters total 5,353.

1998 – The clinic pursues a partnership with Milwaukee County as a General Assistance Medical Program.

Spring 1999 – Ed, who with the help of St. Ben’s clinic fought the ravages of alcoholism, commented to a reporter, “If I wrote the Mission Statement for this place, it would be simple – ‘Let us offer love and service.’”

2000 – Major expansion at the 1027 site leads to a total of five exam rooms, accommodating more clients and volunteer providers and expansion of health education services for the clinic’s patients.

2007 – Medical and social encounters including outreach total 13,212. The entire staff consists of eight paid staff and 12-17 volunteer receptionists and physicians.

2008 – The clinic operates under the sponsorship of the Columbia St. Mary’s Foundation, Health Care for the Homeless, and St. Ben’s parish ministries.



St. Ben’s jail ministry operates under several umbrellas and with concerned volunteers from around the Milwaukee metro area.

1974 – St. Ben’s Capuchins ask two sisters to aid in their ministry to the nearby Milwaukee County Jail. Sr. Rita Martin, a Racine Dominican, and others interested in the ministry open the Benedict Center for Criminal Justice. Sr. Martin was soon joined by Sr. Mary Rouse, S.D.S., and together they formed the Wisconsin Program for Women and Girl Offenders.

March 1975 – Greg Mulry is hired to research local and state criminal issues.

1976 – Capuchin Alan Veik begins chaplaincy and counseling male offenders.

1977 – Fr. Veik joins the Benedict Center with the women’s ministry.

1978 – The jail ministries are consolidated into the Benedict Center for Criminal Justice, becoming a legal entity distinct from St. Ben’s. St. Ben’s continues to provide a home and support center to jail chaplains and ministers.

1984 – A ministry program begins that pairs a senior woman with a male inmate. She visits him weekly.

July 1989 – Jail ministers oversee the production of a three-dimensional model of St. Ben’s by County jail inmates. The model is then displayed at St. Joseph church in Wauwatosa.

October 17, 1990 – The Benedict Center announces a jail art project entitled “What I See from Here...”



Mid 1990s – Sr. Barbara Kutchera, BVM, organizes and holds jail retreats for women twice a year..

June 4, 1991 – Hidden People – Hidden Talents, an art exhibit featuring the work of inmates in the Milwaukee County jail and prisons, celebrates its opening reception at the Milwaukee County War Memorial Center.

April 30, 2005 – Jail ministry programs include

- Retreats with women three times annually
- Friday morning support group for jail chaplains and ministers
- Collection of prayer petitions
- Advocacy for incarcerated men and women
- Holiday Gift Project (begins around 1990)
- Seminary students from St. Francis seminary

Parish Pastors

1913-1923 Stephen Eckert

1923-1950 Philip Steffes

1950-1955 Edmund Kramer

1955-1957 Alphonse Heckler

1957-1961 Howard Meunier

1961-1967 Simeon Keogh

1967-1970 Gordon Garske

1970-1973 Alex Luzi

1973-1975 Alex Luzi/Austin Schlaefter (co-pastors)

1975-1978 Dan Crosby and team

1978-1981 Larry Abler

1981-1985 David Ashbeck

1985-1987 Mark Ramion

1987-1993 Michael Fountain

1993-2000 Michael Sullivan

2000-2004 John Celichowski

2004-present Jerry Schroeder

Herbert Mathieu was acting pastor during several of the terms in the late 1950s and early 1960s