

Communities of the Word

STORIES OF THE CHICAGO PROVINCE



THE MIDWEST DISTRICT STORY, 1925 – 2012

Rev. Donald Ehr et al.



CHICAGO MIDWEST DISTRICT

The idea of a district, bringing together the Divine Word Missionaries in various ministries in a given area, first shows up in the 1965 *Catalogus* under the heading of the “Chicago” or “Chicago-St. Louis” District. In 1983 the name was changed to the “Midwest District.”

The current Midwest District includes the parishes of St. Anselm and St. Elizabeth in Chicago; St. Joseph the Worker in Wheeling, Illinois; and St. Patrick in Fort Wayne, Indiana. In addition, the district is home to the Bowman-Francis Team in Indianapolis, as well as an apostolate to the Vietnamese in Cincinnati.

The district has also included, at one time or another, the parishes of Our Lady of the Gardens (Chicago), St. Rita (Indianapolis), and St. Mark's (Venice, Illinois). An apostolate to the Spanish-speaking community in the Pilsen & Little Village neighborhoods of Chicago (Misión Verbita) that later migrated to the north and northwest suburbs around Des Plaines, as well as a variety of individual ministries and apostolates have been a part of the District.

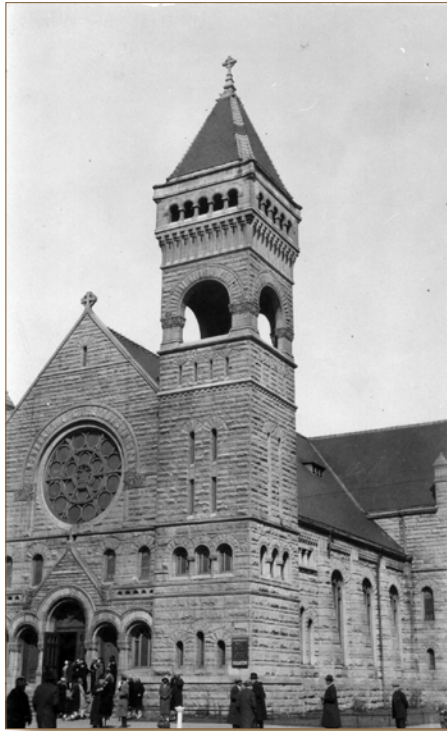
For many years the Chicago-Midwest District included ministries in the St. Louis area. With the opening of parish ministries in Memphis, Tennessee, at the invitation of Bishop Terry Steib, St. Louis was joined with Memphis to form the Southern District in 2003.

THE MIDWEST PARISHES

St. Elizabeth, Chicago

Divine Word Missionaries have staffed St. Elizabeth since 1925. Its history as the oldest existing black Catholic church in Chicago is closely tied up with the parish of St. Monica and its founding pastor, Father Augustus Tolton, recognized by many as the first American black priest. After Father Tolton's premature death in 1897, St. Monica was variously cared for by the pastor of St. Elizabeth – sometimes as a mission, sometimes with a resident priest. It clearly suffered from lack of leadership and commitment until the Society of the Divine Word was asked to take over the parish in 1915. Several years later, in 1921, a youthful German SVD, Father Joseph Eckert, was appointed pastor. Under his dynamic leadership St. Monica thrived as the only Catholic parish in Chicago dedicated to African Americans. In 1925 Cardinal Mundelein merged St. Monica with St. Elizabeth with Father Eckert as pastor, and so began a long and blessed ministry to the African Americans on Chicago's Southside.

It is hard for us today to grasp the significance of St. Elizabeth and its many services to the people of Bronzeville (the name given to the neighborhood surrounding St. Elizabeth). The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament ran an elementary school at St. Elizabeth as well



The original St. Elizabeth Church.

as Chicago's only black Catholic high school, which closed in 1967. There was also a social center, called the Shiel House. An article in the *U.S. Catholic Historian* reports:

By the mid-1920s, thousands of blacks made St. Elizabeth Parish space their home, as descendants of enslaved Africans learned and worshipped in sacred spaces built by Irish-Americans two generations earlier. Southern migrants, most arriving as non-Catholics, nonetheless found ways to attach a sense of the "Black-Belt's" Catholic space. St. Elizabeth's 1925 annual report counted 2,500 parishioners, almost all African Americans and many new to Catholicism. In the previous year alone, 203 persons converted to Catholicism, and nearly 45 percent of weddings resulted in "mixed" marriages (i.e. unions between Catholics and non-Catholics). Many conversions began in the parish school, which required

students to learn Catholic catechism class, and parents to attend weekly evening courses on Church doctrine. In one 1926 conversion class for example, 96 children from St. Elizabeth School and 14 children from public schools, along with 54 adults, entered the Catholic Church. . . . St. Elizabeth offered a unique benefit to African-American families—an educational alternative to the Black-Belt's substandard public schools.¹

Between 1921 and 1932 Father Eckert baptized 1,728 adults. In 1931, 920 children were enrolled in the St. Elizabeth elementary school and 70 in high school.

The vitality of St. Elizabeth can also be seen in the many black Catholic organizations that originated in St. Monica and St. Elizabeth parishes:

- St. Monica Branch—Ladies Catholic Benevolent Association (1891)
- Augustus Tolton Court 397—Women's Catholic Order of Foresters (1898)
- Christian Mother Sodality (1922)—renamed St. Elizabeth Ladies Sodality (1945)
- Knights of Peter Claver—Council No. 67 (1930)
- St. Elizabeth High School Alumni (1930)
- Ladies K.P.C. Auxiliary Court No. 67 (1933)
- Father Joseph Eckert 4th Degree Assembly of Knights of Peter Claver (1944)

Many readers will be surprised to know that Friendship House, founded by Baroness Ekaterina Fyodorovna Kolyschkine de Hueck Doherty (better known as Catherine Doherty), was established within St. Elizabeth parish at 4233 S. Indiana in 1938. Few also realize that a Catholic center for black families opened in 1937 on the Westside within the boundaries of St. Malachy Church under the direction of the Divine Word Missionaries and Blessed Sacrament Sisters as an extension of St. Elizabeth parish.

On January 3, 1930, a disastrous fire struck St. Elizabeth church, and the church building was totally destroyed. Cardinal George Mundelein decided that the church would not be rebuilt, so the



St. Elizabeth Church after the fire.

assembly hall on 41st Street was remodeled and served as the parish church until 1989.²

The remodeled assembly hall was outfitted with pews from the burned-out church. Two murals were painted that reflected the heritage of black Catholics: St. Peter Claver and the Ugandan Martyrs. Auxiliary Bishop Bernard Sheil dedicated this new facility on February 1, 1931.

When the new church was opened in 1989, it was possible to remodel the old assembly hall—church, once again, for use as a gym for the school and a center for outreach services to the neighborhood. Job training and placement programs and an open gym became a welcome and safe gathering place for young people from the nearby Robert Taylor Homes. Thus, in this and in so many other ways, St. Elizabeth fulfilled its self-described mission to be a full-service church to its members and to the community.

Special mention must be made of the appointment of Father Dominic Carmon as pastor of St. Elizabeth in 1968. Those who remember the Black Power movement of the late 1960s will also



St. Elizabeth School.

remember the stirrings among black Catholic clergy and religious for black leadership in the Catholic Church. Partly in response to this, Father Carmon guided St. Elizabeth. He left as his legacy a new parish rectory with its attached social hall and garage.

St. Elizabeth remains very active in the community. It is a partner with three other historical non-Catholic black churches in the renovation of the Wabash YMCA, with its 107 SRO units and a gym and pool and recreation area for community use. St. Elizabeth also joined forces with three other churches to create the Genesis neighborhood development corporation which built 29 new homes and is currently involved in rehabbing others for rental or ownership.

Recently during the pastorate of Father Richard (Rick) Andrus, the Ghanaian Catholic community has made St. Elizabeth its church home and celebrates a Ghanaian-language Mass on Sundays.

The neighborhood surrounding St. Elizabeth has undergone profound change in the first decade of the present century. The high-rise CHA housing of Stateway Gardens and the Robert Taylor Homes, which stretched for two-and-a-half miles along State Street and included 40,000 inhabitants, has been demolished. In their place, new mixed housing, a combination of owner-occupant and rental CHA homes, has slowly been built. This gentrification process has slowed down due to the economic downturn that began in 2008, but all of Bronzeville is undergoing development.

Pastors of St. Elizabeth	
Father Joseph Eckert	1925–1932
Father Ladislaus Pawlowski	1932–1933
Father Anthony Humel	1933–1934
Father Bruno Drescher	1934–1942
Father William Brambrink	1942–1953
Father Clement Shapker	1953–1963
Father George Stephan	1963–1968
Father Dominic Carmon	1968–1984
Father Donald Ehr	1984–2000
Father Richard Andrus	2000–2013
Father Antoine Leason	2013–

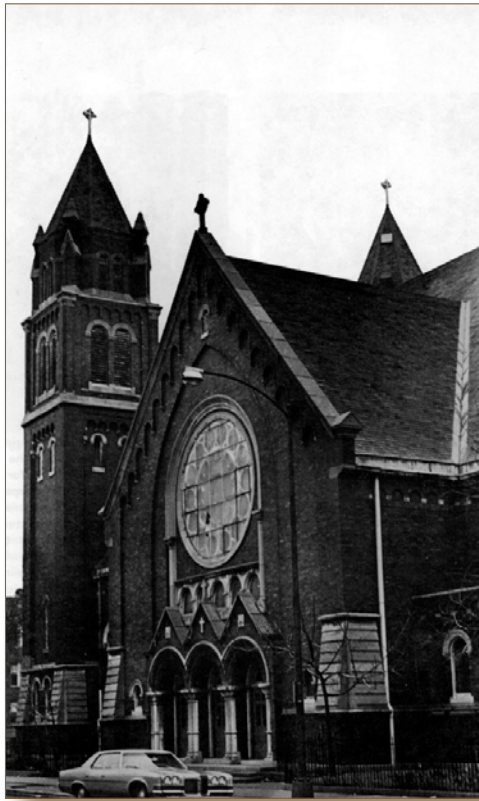
St. Anselm, Chicago

St. Anselm was organized as a parish in 1909 drawing parishioners from predominantly Irish neighboring parishes. In the same year a combination church, school building and rectory were built. St. Anselm School opened on September 9, 1910, with an enrollment of 200 students under the direction of the Sisters of Providence. The convent for the Sisters was completed by November 1911. A new Romanesque church with stained-glass windows from Munich, Germany, and three altars carved from Italian Carrara marble was blessed by Cardinal Mundelein on December 13, 1925.

Meanwhile, a large-scale migration of blacks from the southern United States to Chicago brought blacks into what had been predominantly white Irish neighborhoods, including that of west Washington Park where St. Anselm is located.

Hundreds of Irish families moved out, and attendance at the parish school dropped from 400 to the low 100s. In this context Cardinal Mundelein and his consultants decided to turn St. Anselm over to the Society of the Divine Word, with instructions to welcome all people, irrespective of color.

In a private manuscript Father Eckert tells of how he learned



St. Anselm Church, Chicago.

that this appointment was coming. He tells how, as the pastor of St. Elizabeth after the fire that destroyed the church, he had an appointment to see the cardinal. With the insurance check in his pocket he met with the cardinal, who, to his surprise, took the check and authorized him to remodel the assembly hall as a church. The cardinal then told Father Eckert he was going to be named the new pastor of St. Anselm the following year. St. Anselm, the cardinal said, would become the premier black parish of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Under Father Eckert's leadership, St. Anselm became a thriving black parish. By 1936, 500 children were enrolled in the school staffed by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. In his eight years as pastor, Father Eckert baptized more than 1,500 converts.³

Father Edward Luis, the pastor from 1951 to 1961, saw to the completion of the St. Anselm Recreation Center on 61st Street and

Indiana Avenue. Cardinal Samuel Stritch dedicated the \$500,000 center on September 9, 1951. It included a gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria, and facilities for indoor roller skating and dancing. In 1959, an addition was made to the school building.

In April 1976, St. Anselm hosted a jubilee Mass to celebrate the 100th birthday of the Society of the Divine Word and its 60 years of service in the black parishes of St. Elizabeth, St. Anselm, and Our Lady of the Gardens.

On the weekend of June 13–14, 2009, St. Anselm celebrated its own centennial. On that day the parish community and former members and friends gathered in the church for a time of grateful remembrance and prayer. A festive dinner followed in the parish hall. That Sunday, Cardinal Francis George presided at the centennial liturgy. In his homily he congratulated the parish for its 100 years of outstanding service to the community, and the Society of the Divine Word for its leadership of the parish since 1932.

Pastors of St. Anselm	
Father Joseph Eckert	1932–1940
Father Gerard Heffels	1941–1951
Father Edward Luis	1951–1961
Father Elzear Gehlen	1962–1978
Father Charles Burns	1978–1979
Father Melvin James	1979–1989
Father Richard Jeschke	1989–1991
Father Derek Simons	1991–1993
Father William Hegarty	1993–2002
Father Mark Weber	2002–2005
Father Richard Andrus, admin.	2005– 2008
Father Abelardo Gabriel, admin.	2008–present

Volunteer Missions Movement (VMM) and St. Anselm

One of the most important recent developments at St. Anselm was the three-year ministry of two Volunteer Missions Movement (VMM) lay missionaries, Jim and Evelyn McKeown. The VMM is an organization of lay missionaries working with established religious communities.

Jim and Evelyn, parents of eight and grandparents of 21, moved into the St. Anselm rectory on September 1, 1998. They planned to live in the rectory for three-to-five months as a kind of orientation before finding their own apartment.

Six weeks later, Brother Jim Fisher, the point person on the pilot project, died of a heart attack. Father William Hegarty, the pastor, was away recovering from hip surgery.

Jim and Evelyn were thrust into this void. Upon Father Hegarty's return, he asked Jim and Evelyn to continue living in the rectory. Their goals, as determined in previous meetings, were twofold: (1) to organize and guide outreach ministries toward children in the neighborhood and open a food pantry of some kind, and (2) to nurture parishioners into leadership in these projects.

The outcome of these efforts came to be known as the Jim Fisher Development Center (JFDC) and the HOPE Project.

JFDC grew out of a small, floundering afterschool program. Grants and volunteers transformed the old convent into a home for both JFDC and the HOPE Project. JFDC has grown into a year-round program for up to 125 students with an operating budget of more than \$175,000. The HOPE Project began as a ministry to the homeless, street people, and the poor of the neighborhood. It is not a food pantry. All the HOPE food is donated or purchased. HOPE members earn a right to food by somehow giving back to the community. The HOPE member finds at St. Anselm a clean, safe place to socialize, develop friendships, and learn new skills.

In addition to the two outreach ministries, the VMM missionaries participated in St. Anselm's mission in a variety of other ways. In the wake of Brother Jim's death, they became involved in administration, building and property management, and fund-raising. They also assisted in planning and coordinating Lenten exercises, provided marriage preparation and Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) programs, assisted victimized families, and participated in neigh-



Volunteer Missionaries Evelyn and Jim McKeown.

borhood block clubs and the Chicago Police Department's Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) programs.

In 1999, Jim and Evelyn moved out of the rectory to their own apartment one-and-a-half blocks away from the church. They found this to be a good move in developing solidarity with the people and becoming part of the community in ways not possible while living in the rectory.

In October 2000, the Provincial, Father Stanley Uroda, asked them to stay a third year. After prayer, reflection, and consultation they decided to stay through August 2001. Since returning to their home in Naperville, Illinois, the McKeowns have continued to be involved in various projects and to support the parish.

In order to renovate the convent, the Jim Fisher Development Center was awarded a \$75,000 Home Depot grant. The McKeowns raised another \$80,000 from donors to pay for labor costs. Today JFDC is housed in modern, bright, and expanded child-friendly facilities.

The total three-year cost for the VMM lay missionaries came to \$70,350, none of which was paid by the Society of the Divine Word or St. Anselm parish. Revenues raised by the VMM missionaries over the three years through grants, cash, and in-kind donations amounted to

approximately \$325,000. Supporting funds, estimated to be in excess of \$1.5 million, continue to flow into St. Anselm parish and its ministries even after the VMM missionaries' departure.

St. Patrick, Fort Wayne, Indiana

The following is an excerpt from the Fort Wayne diocesan newspaper, written by Bishop John D'Arcy, December 21, 2008:

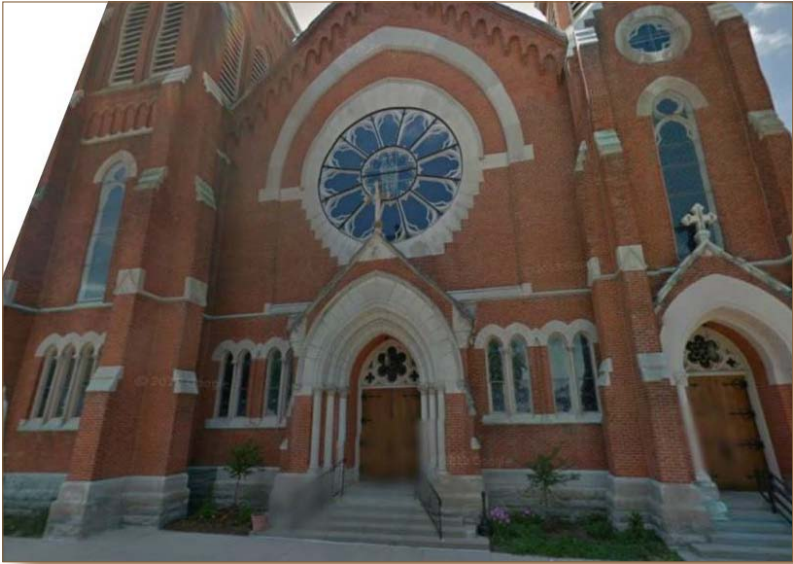
It is difficult to express the gratitude in my heart to the Society of the Divine Word for what they have done for St. Patrick Parish.

It began when we obtained the assistance of Father Chau Pham, SVD, to give the pastoral care to the Vietnamese community. Later, at the approval of his Provincial Superior, I appointed him pastor. I wrote to his superior asking if we could have a Spanish-speaking priest for the community of St. Patrick's. We have received Father Tom Aschman, SVD. He is the assistant Provincial and has served six years in Mexico, and is not only fluent in Spanish, but understands the Mexican culture. In fact, his doctoral dissertation included a study of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the culture surrounding it, the apparition itself, and the nature of the conversion which followed the apparition.

There must have been close to 1,200 people at the Mass in honor of our Lady of Guadalupe. . . .

After a fine Mexican lunch, I met with the lay leadership of the Latino community, along with Father Chau and Father Tom. I learned about the strong prayer groups, which meet every week and saw clearly the lay leadership that is growing in this parish.

I have been trying for a considerable time to seek stability at St. Patrick's. Through the fault of no one, there has been a turnover in pastoral leadership. With the coming of Father Chau Pham and now Father Tom, the people have sensed a fresh beginning, and a great sense of hope is evident.



St. Patrick Church.

Here is a statistic that all of our priests and people may find of interest. I was told there will be 250 baptisms this year at St. Patrick's. Currently, there are 250 in the religious education program. But if the rate of baptisms continues that means in five of six years, there will be an enormous need for catechists. . . . There are many physical needs at St. Patrick's. The St. Patrick's School, which serves as a meeting place, needs a roof. There is need for tuck-pointing in both the school and church. But we are better as a church, when there are challenges like this. ⁴

Two Divine Word Missionaries have served as pastor at St. Patrick: Father Chau Pham (2007–2011) and Father Andrew Thu Pham (2011–present).

St. Joseph the Worker, Wheeling, Illinois

Fr. Michael Bonner⁵ relates: August 12, 2004, I was home at St. Bronislava Parish, in southeast Chicago, when I got a telephone call from Father Thomas Krosnicki, provincial of the Chicago Province. He greeted me with "Congratulations!"

I said, “Thank you,” thinking it was a happy-birthday call because that day was my 67th birthday. I had been at St. Bronislava parish since the Conventional Franciscans left the parish because of a shortage of manpower. It was my tenth year, and I was looking forward to staying there two more years according to the renewed appointment the Provincial Council gave me a year prior.

However, when I mentioned this to Father Krosnicki, he said, “Yes, time is flying and I’m getting older,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked, and then asked him why he was calling me—because “today is my birthday?”

He apologized and then said, “Happy birthday, but the reason I am calling is to tell you that you have been appointed to St. Joseph the Worker in Wheeling.”

I gasped and said, “Tom, you have to be kidding! I’m 67 years old and you gave me a couple more years here. Couldn’t you find a younger man?”

He replied, “No, I want you to go there and I am going to give you two associates, one for the Polish speakers and one for the Hispanics. You will be the pastor. Bishop Jerome Listecky has asked us to take the parish over since the previous pastor resigned and they can’t get anyone to take the parish yet. Since we have been helping out there for nearly a year in the different languages, Bishop Listecky thought we could handle the parish nicely.”

That was my introduction and appointment. I begged him to get out of it and so did my parishioners with many letters. He said he appreciated their sentiments but the appointment was final. He would announce the other appointees once he was assured they could come. They were Fr. Jerzy (George) Gawlik (Polish) and Fr. Paul Cuong Nguyen (Vietnamese).

I guess no diocesan priest was interested in the parish because over half the parishioners are immigrants and the collections are small, averaging about \$8,300 a Sunday. Furthermore the parish operates in three languages—Polish, English, Spanish—and we have about eight percent Filipinos along with sprinklings of Indians, Koreans, Russians, and so on, plus our founding Anglos, many of whom are up in age. There are also a number of black parishioners.

The former pastor left hurriedly and secretly got married at the age of 66 and the rumors were flying. This parish also had two priests



St. Joseph the Worker.

and one principal incarcerated for pedophilia. This was a difficult situation to overcome. Moreover the school's 12 classrooms were empty, and the buildings were getting older with many maintenance problems. Hence the lack of interest in the parish, even though it was a suburban parish.

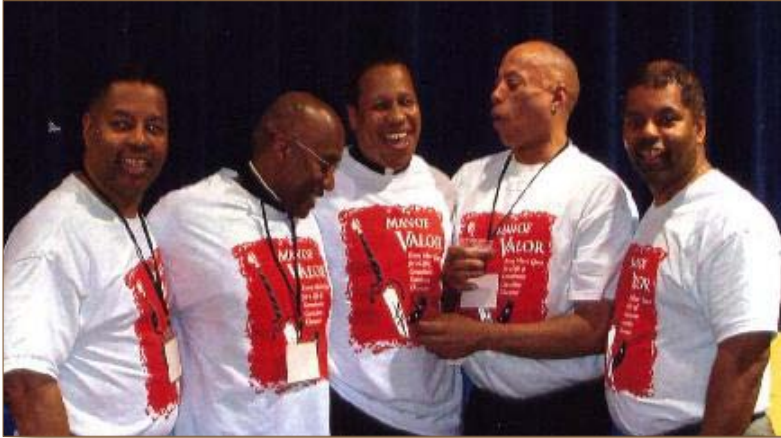
We have witnessed quite a turnaround. We now have a flourishing Polish school on Friday evenings and Saturdays with Polish language, history and religious education for about 670 children. The Hispanic religious education program has about 200 children, and the English-language program has about 130 students. This is very satisfying and is truly mission work.

Baptisms of Spanish infants are plentiful. On one July Saturday, Father Paul Cuong Nguyen had 46 baptisms.

Since the parish hall was very small, the parish sold 11 acres of wetlands behind the parking lot (we had 26 acres in all). With that \$1.4 million the parish built a beautiful, large social hall to accommodate the programs of many parish organizations including our Lenten Friday night fish fries that draw hundreds of people from the parish and nearby suburbs.

Bowman-Francis Ministry Team, Indianapolis, Indiana

The Bowman-Francis Ministry Team is named after two black Divine Word pioneers of the Southern Province, Father John Bowman and Bishop Joseph Francis. The team was first based in Atlanta, Georgia, where Archbishop James P. Lyke, OSF, gave them great encour-



Fathers Chester Smith, Roy Lee, Anthony Bozeman, Kenneth Hamilton and Charles Smith.

agement and support. Upon his death in 1992, the team relocated to Indianapolis where they were welcomed by Father Anthony Clark, then pastor of St. Rita Parish.

The team has consisted of the twin brothers, Fathers Chester and Charles Smith, and Father Kenneth Hamilton, with occasional assistance from Fathers Stephan Brown and George Kintiba.

The ministry of the brothers Smith is national in scope. They preach, conduct missions, sponsor youth programs, and work for the formation of black Catholic men. Father Charles Smith has also ministered in federal prisons and hospitals. Father Chester Smith has served as president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

CLOSED OR DISCONTINUED MINISTRIES

Over the long history of the Society of the Divine Word involvement in the Midwest, especially around Chicago, there have been a number of ministry projects and institutions that were associated with Techny prior to the formation of the Midwest District. Providing a few details about these ministries helps to give a more complete picture of the history of the Society's involvement in the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Midwest as a whole.

St. Norbert, Techny/Northbrook, Illinois

St. Norbert Parish began as a mission staffed by priests of the

Society of the Divine Word. On Pentecost Sunday, May 21, 1899, the first Mass was celebrated in a rented building known as the Mission of the Holy Ghost. With the completion of the Society of the Divine Word Mission House in 1900, the chapel served as the parish church for Catholics from the surrounding community.

During the pastorate of Father Friedrich Reichelt (1914-1929), a combination church and school building was erected on the grounds at Techny and the name of the parish was changed to St. Norbert. The Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters staffed the school in the building that is now the Mission Office.

Following World War II, Father Charles Haefner purchased five acres of property in the heart of Northbrook. On May 30, 1949, Samuel Cardinal Stritch traveled to Northbrook to dedicate the new school-chapel and rectory, and celebrate the golden jubilee of the parish.

In 1953 care of the parish was transferred to the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Divine Word Pastors of St. Norbert	
Father John Peil	1899-1900
Father Joseph Fischer	1900-1901
Father Francis de Lange	1901-1907
Father Adolph Burgmer	1907-1914
Father Friedrich Reichelt	1914-1929
Father Matthias Braun.	1929-1931
Father Joseph Hölken	1931-1935
Father George Schmuelling	1935-1936
Father Peter Stoll	1936-1941
Father William Benz	1941-1944
Father Charles Haefner	1945-1953

Our Lady of the Gardens, Chicago

Altgeld Gardens is a public housing project in Chicago located from 130th Street on the north to 138th Street on the south, between the Bishop Ford Freeway and the Calumet River. Built in 1945 and

spread over 190 acres, it was meant to satisfy the need for housing of African-American veterans returning from World War II. Originally owned by the federal government, it was deeded to the Chicago Housing Authority in 1956.

In many respects, it is a forgotten part of the city of Chicago. According to one source, with one of the densest concentration of potentially hazardous pollutants, it is like an isolated village. Many of the infrastructure and public facilities taken for granted in other areas of Chicago, such as adequate transportation and shopping, are sorely lacking. Barack Obama in the 1980s, then a local community organizer, participated in a campaign in Altgeld Gardens to rid the area of hazardous materials, especially asbestos, and wrote about it at length in his book *Dreams from My Father*.

Care for the spiritual needs of the Catholic residents of Altgeld Gardens began in December 1945, when two diocesan priests, Father John Ryan, pastor of Holy Name of Mary parish, and his associate, Father John Banahan, became involved.

In November 1949, Cardinal Stritch asked the Divine Word Missionaries to care for the people of Altgeld Gardens. The Society, which already staffed two black parishes, St. Elizabeth and St. Anselm, accepted the call from Cardinal Stritch to minister to the spiritual needs of one of the poorest parishes in the archdiocese. One of the priests from St. Anselm and two Blessed Sacrament Sisters began to minister to the people of Altgeld Gardens in 1950.

In October of that year, an apartment was leased where the priest lived and celebrated Mass. Father George Stephan was appointed pastor, and in March 1952 he broke ground for a church and elementary school.

With few black Catholics in the area, Our Lady of the Gardens was never a flourishing parish, but it had a wide-ranging mission. It served the poorest area of Chicago and gave the children and parents an alternative to the public school system. Our Lady of the Gardens' elementary school was opened in September 1952. A gym was built as a place for recreation and social gatherings for residents.

Our Lady of the Gardens was a beacon of hope to the people of Altgeld Gardens. It was a place where some of the youth were employed in the summertime, and where families in need could go for assistance. It also nurtured several professionals, including doctors, two priests—



Our Lady of the Gardens Church.

the twin brothers, Fathers Charles and Chester Smith, who became Divine Word Missionaries—Bishop Joseph Perry, auxiliary bishop of Chicago; and Holy Spirit Missionary Sister Rose Martin.

The good work of the Society lasted for 40 years from 1949 until 1989 when the Jesuits took over for a three-year period. The final and saddest chapter was in 1992, when the Archdiocese of Chicago decided to close the doors of Our Lady of the Gardens Church. Fortunately, Our Lady of the Gardens School continued its mission to educate the children of Altgeld Gardens. The school continues to this day, although now it is under the auspices of Chicago International Charter Schools.

Pastors of Our Lady of the Gardens

Father George Stephan	1952–1961
Father Aloysius Zimmerman	1962–1976
Father Stanley Farier	1977–1984
Father Dominic Carmon	1985–1989

St. Mark, Venice, Illinois

St. Mark in Venice, Illinois, is the southernmost parish (on the Mississippi River) of the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois. Father Elzear (Al) Gehlen was asked to take over the parish in 1978. The Springfield diocese was looking for help to address the rapid racial change taking place in Venice, which is located across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri. The neighborhood and parish school were all black, the parishioners all white. The goal was to promote racial harmony and do outreach and evangelization to the African-American community.

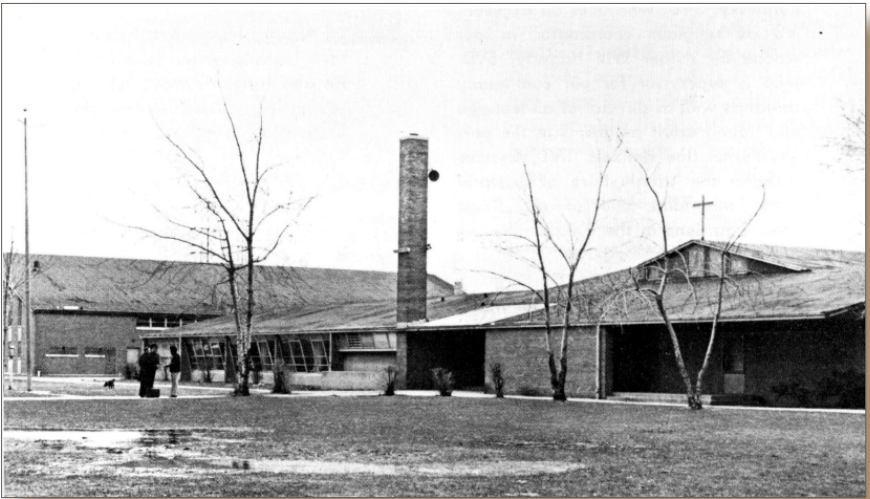
Father Gehlen was assisted by Father Pascal LoBianco, who had been a missionary in Ghana for 33 years until typhoid fever brought him back to the United States to recover. Father LoBianco spent 12 years at St. Mark's, first as parochial vicar and then as pastor. Also helping as assistant pastors were Fathers James Mullaley and Thomas Commons. The Society's ministry at St. Mark's ended in 1994.

St. Rita, Indianapolis, Indiana

From 1973 to 2007, the priests and Brothers of the Society of the Divine Word served St. Rita Parish in Indianapolis. St. Rita mirrored the kingdom of God in the ordinary and mundane tasks of parish life and through the unique qualities of this vibrant parish. St. Rita exemplified the kingdom of God through various committees that performed the many tasks that make up the workings of the parish. The committees included Eucharistic ministers, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), Sacramental Preparation, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society. These committees promoted the work of the Church in many ways. They helped bring the parish family closer together, and they served God's people by feeding and clothing the hungry, praying together as one, and building the spiritual foundation of the parish.

St. Rita also manifested the praise of God through its talented Gospel choir which helped people feel the Spirit by rhythmically awakening emotions that lie deep in their hearts. Such music promoted a sense of unity and solidarity with all God's people by allowing the community to praise God in uplifting and prayerful ways.

Cordial hospitality was a further manifestation of God's presence at St. Rita. When a visitor felt invited to be part of a parish family, that visitor felt God's love reaching out, even in unfamiliar surroundings.



St. Rita Church, Indianapolis.

This was indeed how God's kingdom was realized. St. Rita's relationship with the Society of the Divine Word was shown through the many faces of internationality present in the community.

The kingdom of God was viewed as a worldwide Church, not a church of one or two ethnic groups, but a wide array of nationalities and people. Many people found welcome in this parish, from the Vietnamese community to the many nationalities of the Divine Word Missionaries who served there. The world Church was alive at St. Rita. The kingdom of God was all, in the mundane task of everyday life and in the complicated structures of human society. St. Rita parish was a living example of a small piece of God's kingdom.

A booklet commemorating 34 years of service by the Society of the Divine Word at St. Rita can be found in the Chicago Province Archives. St. Rita was returned to the Archdiocese of Indianapolis in the fall of 2007.

Pastors of St. Rita	
Father John LaBauve	1973–1980
Father Elmer Powell	1980–1983
Father Richard Jeschke	1983–1986
Father Michael Bonner	1987
Father Ponciano Ramos	1988-1992
Father William Fitzgibbon	1993
Father Anthony P. Clark	1994–2002
Father Vincent Burke	2003
Father Stephan Brown	2003–2007

Chicago House of Studies

For a number of years, the Society of the Divine Word operated a “house of further studies” dedicated to St. Albert the Great at 4940 S. Greenwood Ave. The house served as a residence for Divine Word Missionaries studying or teaching at the University of Chicago and at other universities in the Chicago area. The longtime director, Father Ralph Thyken, was also the Director of the National Office of SVD Catholic Universities, which was located at 316 N. Michigan Avenue.

Any number of future college professors, here in the United States and overseas, lived at the house of studies while attending university programs.

Chinese Friendship House

Leaving mainland China with the advent of Communism in the 1950s, Father John Fu ended up in Chicago. In 1961 he opened a dorm or hostel for Chinese students living in the De Paul University area of Chicago’s north side. Singlehandedly he kept his Friendship House going until 1998. He was an advisor, counselor, friend, champion, and priest to many Chinese students until his death.

Hispanic Ministry

The Society of the Divine Word was engaged in Hispanic ministries in the Pilsen/Little Village area of Chicago and then in the northwest suburbs of Des Plaines and Arlington Heights for a number of years.

Beginning in 1986 and continuing through 1994, a group of Divine Word Missionaries—Fathers Lloyd (Sam) Cunningham, James Liebner, Thomas Umbras, Manuel Myvett, Alexander Pytel, Marcelo Cattaneo and others—dedicated themselves to the needs of Hispanic Catholics. They assisted in parishes, catechized, and evangelized without the administrative responsibilities of an established parish.

In the northwest suburbs of Chicago, first from their own rented residence in Des Plaines and then from the Techny residence, Fathers Cunningham, Crescente (Sonny) de Rivera and Carlos Paniagua-Monroy helped develop Mexican-American parish communities and cared for them pastorally. This ministry began in 1997 and ended in 2005.

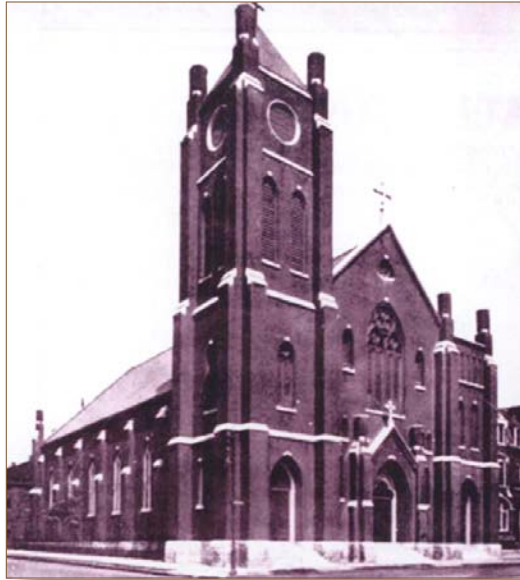
Two Parishes to the Southern District

Two parishes in St. Louis, Missouri, were part of the Chicago/Midwest District for many years. These parishes continue to be administered by the SVD but since 2003 have been part of the Southern District of St. Arnold. Their histories will be told in the Southern District section of the Chicago Province history.

St. Nicholas. St. Louis

St. Nicholas parish in St. Louis, Missouri, was one of our earlier African-American parishes. The following pastors and residents are listed up to the time it became a part of the Southern District in 2003.

Pastors of St. Nicholas	
Father Joseph Hölken	1927–1932
Father Friedrich Reichelt	1933–1937
Father Charles Reinelt	1938–1948
Father William Benz	1949–1958
Father Jerome Brzakowski	1959–1978
Father Donald Murrin	1979–1988
Father Thomas Leibold	1989
Father Richard Andrus	1990–2001
Father Stephan Brown	2002–2003



Old St. Nicholas Church, St. Louis, Missouri.

Vietnamese Ministry, St. Louis

Since the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the Chicago Province has been blessed with a large number of Vietnamese confreres. In 1998 the Chicago Province was asked to minister to a Vietnamese faith community in St. Louis, Missouri. They gathered first at St. Thomas of Aquin parish and then moved to Resurrection of Our Lord.

Father Chau Pham was the first pastor and continued to serve in that capacity when this ministry became part of the Southern District in 2003.

THE PIONEER FATHER JOSEPH ECKERT

It is always dangerous to single out one individual for special recognition when it is clear that many confreres labored long and hard in the Midwest District. Nevertheless, it seems fitting to conclude this chapter with the words of a tribute given to Father Joseph Eckert by Mr. Anthony Calhoun at the 2011 annual prayer breakfast of the Knights of St. Peter Claver – Joseph Eckert Assembly.⁶

Although our noble assembly is named after Father Joseph



Father Joseph Eckert in 1952.

Eckert, I ask those of you here today who really knows the enormity of Father Joseph Eckert's achievements, how he accomplished them, and what can be done to advance his mission today?

You may also ask: "What does our assembly's namesake have to do with today's theme, 'the fear of God'?"

Let me tell you. First, we are celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the "fear of God" delivering Father Eckert to the Catholic African-American community of Chicago. In his unpublished memoir, Father Eckert writes there was little sleep that night following the Father Provincial's request to take over as parish priest at St. Monica's, the church that Father Augustus Tolton (the first universally recognized African-American priest) built. But for him the vow of obedience, that is the fear of God, sealed his acceptance. On September 4, 1921, Father Eckert celebrated his first Holy Mass at St. Monica, and in the spirit of St. Peter Claver

himself, he went on to expand the Catholic faith on the Southside of Chicago by pastoring St. Monica, St. Elizabeth, and St. Anselm—which was a newer \$375,000 state-of-the-art church at the time. While carrying out his mission at those parishes he conducted 3,982 Holy Baptisms, primarily to African Americans, from 1921 to 1940. That is an average greater than 209 per year. He established the first Catholic high school for blacks in Chicago. His successful mission work among the black population of Chicago inspired the archdiocese and religious societies to maintain parish operations in communities where blacks migrating from the South displaced the ethnic white population while other organized faiths closed shop.

While Father Eckert's record of bringing African Americans to the Catholic faith is nothing short of miraculous, what is more phenomenal are the trials and tribulations he overcame to carry out his mission as a Catholic parish priest on the Southside of the city. Although Cardinal Mundelein felt that he was responsible for black souls as well as white souls, he was unable to give the appropriate level of care to the population due to prevailing attitudes of the times—thus leading to the need for the missionary efforts of the SVDs. To put it another way, Father Eckert achieved what he did with minimal archdiocesan support. Second, many black people who migrated to Chicago from the Deep South were dyed-in-the-wool Baptists or Methodists. While working the neighborhoods and visiting potential parishioners, many would not open their doors to Father Eckert. Others would spit in his face and tell him, “We do not want a Catholic priest around here,” then slam their doors shut.

Meanwhile, remaining white parishioners at St. Elizabeth and St. Anselm wanted Father Eckert to adopt segregationist policies. To them Father Eckert would invoke the “fear of God” by telling those parishioners that such practices would be a sin and he would not become a sinner.



Father Eckert with First Communion class.

Father Eckert also had to deal with two orders of white religious Sisters who decided to leave his parishes once the children transitioned from white to black. Catholicism was a faith for everyone. Father Eckert's devotional services attracted thousands. One such service drew over 12,000 worshippers.

Father Eckert effectively used the school where all children, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, were required to be present in religion class. Through the children, Father Eckert often reached the parents.

Most importantly Father Eckert relied on constant prayer and study. He studied the lives of great missionaries such as St. Paul, St. Francis Xavier, St. Peter Claver, and the founder of the SVDs, St. Arnold Janssen. Father Eckert directed his efforts toward an increased spirit of prayer. Over time Father Eckert lived out the words Cardinal Mundelein counseled him with prior to his taking on the assignment at St. Monica; "Father, you are about to undertake a difficult task. If you

wish to be successful, you will have to spend yourself and be spent.” Sir Knight Father Eckert left it all on the religious playing field.

In regards to those Sisters who hightailed it out of Father Eckert’s parishes, well, thank God for the Sisters of Blessed Sacrament who replaced them.

So what can we do as clergy and Sir Knights to further the mission of Father Eckert?

First, to the clergy, I ask that you search your soul not seven but seven hundred times and find that inspiration that called you to the priesthood. Review the teaching and experiences of Father Eckert. Find that encouragement from the great missionaries previously mentioned and use it to reignite the spirit in your parishes.

To the Sir Knights and lay parishioners in this room, I ask you to be that lay apostle of whom Father Eckert was so proud. Start in your own homes. If there is a non-Catholic under your roof, convert them! Talk to your relatives, friends, and associates about why you are Catholic and what your faith has done for you. As lay apostles, we have reaches that our priest does not. I beg you to use it. There is not a Sir Knight in this room that should have a wife, son, daughter, grandchild, great-grandchild, not Catholic. After all, you are a Sir Knight armed for God and the leader under your respective roofs.

Last, I ask that after we get Father Augustus Tolton canonized, we Assembly 12 of the Knights of St. Peter Claver, the benefactor of Father Joseph Eckert’s name, re-sharpen our swords and go into battle for the canonization of Father Joseph Eckert. My research has taught me, if it had not been for Father Joseph Eckert there would be but few if any black Catholics on the Southside of Chicago and the respective souls not saved.

Thank you.

VDUETICN—*Vivat Deus Unus et Trinus in Cordibus Nostris* (May the Triune God live in our hearts). [The acronym VDUETICN is often found in older SVD letters and documents.]

FATHER ECKERT—CHRONOLOGY

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|-------------------|---|
| January 17, 1884 | Born to Augustine and Maria (Rieger) Eckert, Volkdmannsdorf, Kreiss, Neisse, Germany. |
| January 22, 1884 | Baptized in the village church. |
| October 1896 | Denied entrance to the Society of the Divine Word's Holy Cross Mission House near Neisse. |
| February 1897 | Parish priest reapplied on his behalf to the SVD Mission House; accepted and reported as instructed on April 24. |
| February 14, 1909 | Ordained a priest. |
| May 25, 1909 | Taught classes in classical languages at St. Mary's Mission House, Techny, Illinois; assistant rector from 1919–1921. |
| September 4, 1921 | Named pastor of St. Monica. |
| December 5, 1924 | Moved St. Monica congregation to St. Elizabeth. |
| February 14, 1934 | Celebrated Silver Jubilee of priesthood while pastor at St. Anselm. |
| July 23, 1940 | First provincial of Southern Province (USS); established provincial office in Bay St. Louis, the home of St. Augustine seminary; wrote many articles for the benefit of African-American converts and black clergy. |
| June 1, 1948 | Went to Canada to start the Society's new foundation: St. John Baptist Seminary at Granby, Province of Québec. |
| January 15, 1952 | Named pastor of St. Rose de Lima Church in Bay St. Louis, MS. |
| Mid-1953 | Reassigned to his former work of delivering talks about the mission among the blacks. |

- February 14, 1959 Celebrated his Golden Jubilee.
March 29, 1965 Succumbed to cardiac failure, St. Joseph Hospital, Meridian, MS.
April 3, 1965 Funeral Mass celebrated at St. Anselm's in Chicago as he had requested; buried at St. Mary Cemetery, Techny, IL.

NOTES

1. Timothy B. Neary, "Black-Belt Catholic Space: African American Parishes in Interwar Chicago," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Volume 18, no. 4 (Fall 2000), pp. 76-ff.
2. In 1989 the current church on the corner of 41st Street and Michigan Avenue was blessed by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.
3. Father Eckert, who had been named the first provincial of the Southern Province in 1940, died at age 81 on March 29, 1965. He was buried from St. Anselm.
4. "Bishop Observes Festivities with Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe," *Today's Catholic*, Volume 82, no. 47 (December 21, 2008), p.3.
5. This history of St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Wheeling, Illinois, was written by Father Michael Bonner.
6. History Committee, Knights of Peter Claver Council #181, "History," 2011.