

ST. ROSA YOUNG

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Rosa Jinsey Young is known as the mother of black Lutheranism in central Alabama,¹ as she singlehandedly brought the Lutheran church to rural Alabama from 1916 onward, establishing churches and schools for underserved black children and families. Her ministry led to the founding of what is now known as Concordia College Alabama in Selma, the only historically black Lutheran college in the nation.

Young was the fourth of ten children, born on May 14, 1890, to Grant and Nancy Young in Rosebud, Alabama. Rosebud was a tiny backwoods community in rural Wilcox County, the fifty-fifth poorest county in the nation,² at the time only recently redeemed from slavery and still struggling with post-Reconstruction poverty, powerlessness, and prejudice toward its black citizens. Into this world came Rosa, a small and sickly child, with a spiritual intensity and deep love of learning that guided her all her life. She recounted the despair she felt when she lost her first book, a “blue-black speller” that had fallen into a crack in their “log hut.”³ Later, her only book was the Bible: “I would sit for hours reading it.”⁴ She was baptized at age ten into the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in which her father was a pastor.⁵

From her earliest days, Rosa always wanted to be a teacher and serve “her people.”⁶ Because of Alabama’s punitive laws and mandated segregation, schools were few and far between for black children, as Young’s own life attested. She remembered going to “ABC class” and finishing in one day; the next time she was in school, she attended night classes with older students taught by her uncle, a student at the Tuskegee Institute.⁷ She did not remember how long she studied the Bible at home without a teacher, but the next time she was sent to school, she was placed in the fifth grade. She loved school and would finish her work in the fields early to get there on time. She completed the highest level she could attain at the time—sixth

grade—and taught her brothers and sisters.⁸

Back in the fields, picking cotton, Young prayed to realize her dream to become a teacher. God answered her prayer in those same cotton fields through the suggestion of Captain J. C. Harper.

One day while I was picking cotton on one of Mr. Harper’s cotton patches... [I was] singing to myself the following little plantation song: “Give me Jesus, give me Jesus, you may have all this world, give me Jesus.” Mr. Harper came riding along on a big red saddle horse. Looking down upon me he said, “Rosa, your people ought to educate you; they sure ought to give you an education. You are teaching these other children how to work. You teach them in their books at night, too don’t you?”⁹

Her parents approved the idea, and soon she was preparing to attend Payne University, an AME-sponsored school in Selma, fifty-four miles away from home by train. Young had picked enough cotton from Harper’s fields to buy her books, clothes, and train fare. Her parents sent her food by freight.¹⁰ Her joy was soon diminished, however, since she was the only student “from the country” attending the big-city school; she was mercilessly teased and mocked. She spent most of her first months “crying, studying, and praying,” but she didn’t give up. In time, she was embraced by the other students, even though the country girl had to leave school early and return late every year because of her work on the cotton crop.¹¹

Over the course of six years, Young won numerous scholastic awards, became editor of the school newspaper, and was valedictorian of her graduating class in 1909.¹² She also published a booklet on her strong belief in Christian service, based on her favorite Bible verse, Matthew 23:11.

Rosa Young’s ministry singlehandedly brought the Lutheran church to rural Alabama and led to the founding of the only historically black Lutheran college in the nation.

“He that is greatest among you shall be your servant,” is the language of the Great Teacher. To serve is regarded as a divine privilege as well as a duty by every right-minded man. Do something worthy for mankind, is the cry of the civilized world. Give light to those who are in darkness; sustain the weak and faltering; befriend and aid the poor and needy.

As we go from these university halls into the battle of life, where our work is to be done and our places among men to be decided, we should go in the spirit of service, with a determination to do all in our power to uplift humanity.

People are looking to us for strength and help. They need our best efforts, our bravest words, our noblest deeds, our tenderest love, and our most helpful sympathy. This is a needy world; outstretched hands may be seen by the thousands asking for aid. It is our duty to relieve human wants. Let us place our standard high, but be willing to do the lowest task, the most distasteful labor, be ever helpful and generous, and be ready to lend a helping hand.

Good service is an unfailing guide to success. There is nothing more reputable to a race or nation than Christian service. So let us not hesitate, but grasp every opportunity that will enable us to do some good for others.¹³

Young put her words into action after graduating, teaching in numerous schools for rural black children and helping to keep isolated schools open. This task was important, because if a school serving a black community did not operate for one year, the state of Alabama confiscated its funds and gave them to white schools.¹⁴ Public education for blacks received a serious blow in 1891, when the Alabama



Rosa Young Credit: Concordia Historical Institute

legislature passed an apportionment act that allowed Black Belt counties to discriminate between black and white teachers' salaries. In 1910 the average white teacher was paid twice as much as a black teacher: \$50.92 per month as opposed to \$25.23.¹⁵ But Young put service first. “I had an ambition to work for the Lord and my race. I was ready to serve. I had great enthu-

siasm to serve my people; my heart was overwhelmed with compassion for them. This sympathy for the common people has remained with me throughout life.”¹⁶

The life of African-Americans in rural Alabama in the 1920s was difficult at best. The older generation, such as Young's parents, was just decades out of slavery. Most homes



"Rosebud Literary and Industrial School."

A schoolroom on either side of the hall. This building, given to the Lutheran Mission, made room for a new chapel-school in 1927.

The above is the picture of the school house which I built at Rosebud Alabama. I got the money for this from different white southern friends. All who I went to, for help gave me something. Not one turned me down. It was the first building and it is where our first Lutheran church was organized in Alabama.

The school Young built in her hometown of Rosebud, with her own handwritten annotation. Credit: Concordia Historical Institute

were nothing more than shacks without plumbing, heat, or electricity. Families had little to eat; clothing, blankets, even tableware were scarce. Most rural blacks were sharecroppers, farming a white man's land, often the same "plantations" they had worked as slaves. There was little cash, as blacks were paid in scrip to be redeemed at local stores owned by the white landowners. There were few schools, and nearly half the black population was illiterate. There were few schoolhouses; most blacks received their schooling in churches that were so dilapidated and exposed to the elements that the teacher might as well have held class outdoors under an oak tree. "Many times during a heavy shower the children would have to hold an umbrella over me while I heard the class recite."¹⁷ But in this world of deprivation, Young wanted to build a school to give hope and a future to the children in her home community of Rosebud, offering a threefold education of the head, the hand, and the heart.¹⁸ "Among these poor children were bright boys and girls filled with high ambitions with the marks of leadership on their dusky brows which shone like diamonds in a coal bed in the bright sun."¹⁹

Singularly focused, Young began in 1912 to ask local whites and blacks for support. Her first donation of \$50 came from a man named J. Lee Bonner. Young was grate-

ful for Bonner's support throughout her life.²⁰ He loaned her funds to keep the school going, forgave the loan when things got tough, and defended her when community residents accused her church of being "German" during World War I. On receiving Young's first request, Bonner said, "Tell Miss Rosa for me that if she can do anything to help her race ('outcast, despised, and downtrodden'), she can have not only my approval but also my money."²¹

Young's family ties with the Bonners went back two generations: Rosa's maternal grandfather, Samuel Bonner, worked for the Bonner family, and at one time lived with W. J. Bonner, one of J. Lee's brothers, for several years in Camden, Alabama.²² The 1860 Alabama state census reported the population of Wilcox County as 6,795 whites, 26 free blacks, and 17,797 slaves. Wilcox County was the county with the nineteenth-largest number of slaves in the United States at that time. Slaveholder records show that J. L. Bonner of Wilcox County owned forty-two slaves in 1860.²³ While slave records are difficult to come by, evidence points to both of Young's parents as possibly having been born into slavery. Grant Young was born in 1855 and Nancy Bonner Young was born in 1856 in Wilcox County. Earlier generations of the family on both sides had come to Alabama from Virginia. Census records show that Young's maternal great-grandmother came from Virginia, and both her paternal great-grandparents came from the Old Dominion. Because the importation of slaves was outlawed in 1808, from that point on the slave trade took place within the United States, usually from the Upper to the Deep South.²⁴

On leaving W. J. Bonner's home in Camden, and longing to return to Rosebud, Samuel Bonner bought five acres in Rosebud with funds given him by W. J. Those were the same five acres that Rosa Young purchased from his heirs for her school, which still stands today and is used for annual memorial services. The Rosebud Literary and Industrial School opened in October 1912 in an old cattle shed, until the new building "nestled on a hill behind a clump of pines" was ready a month later. She opened the door with a private prayer and "gave the Lord the building with all its contents for the uplift of my race and the spreading of His kingdom." Her first lesson included her favorite illustration for her students: "A life + Christ = success."²⁵ The building still stands in its pinewoods location in Rosebud and is used once a year on the fourth Sunday in September for the annual Rosebud Memorial Service, which traditionally draws over two hundred people, including relatives and former students.

In two years, the school grew from seven to 215 students. The students came from near and far, and many boarded with the Young family for the opportunity to get an education. The school was noted in a government publication as one of the privately funded schools serving black students in the county.²⁶

Then disaster hit. The boll weevil came to Alabama's

Black Belt region in 1914, destroying the cotton crop, and with it the livelihoods of black and white residents. Young's school floundered. She wrote Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute for help. Washington said he couldn't help her but told her to ask the Lutherans, who had worked with black missions in the South and ran parochial schools.²⁷

On October 27, 1915, Young wrote C. F. Drewes, the director of Lutheran black missions in St. Louis:

Dear Friend,

I am writing you concerning a school I have organized. I began teaching here in 1912 with seven pupils in an old hall where the cattle went for shelter. Since then I have bought with money collected in the community five acres of land and erected a four-room schoolhouse thereon, besides a chapel which we are working on now; bought 45 seats, five heaters, one school bell, one sewing machine, one piano, a nice collection of useful books and 150 Bibles and New Testaments for our Bible Training Department.

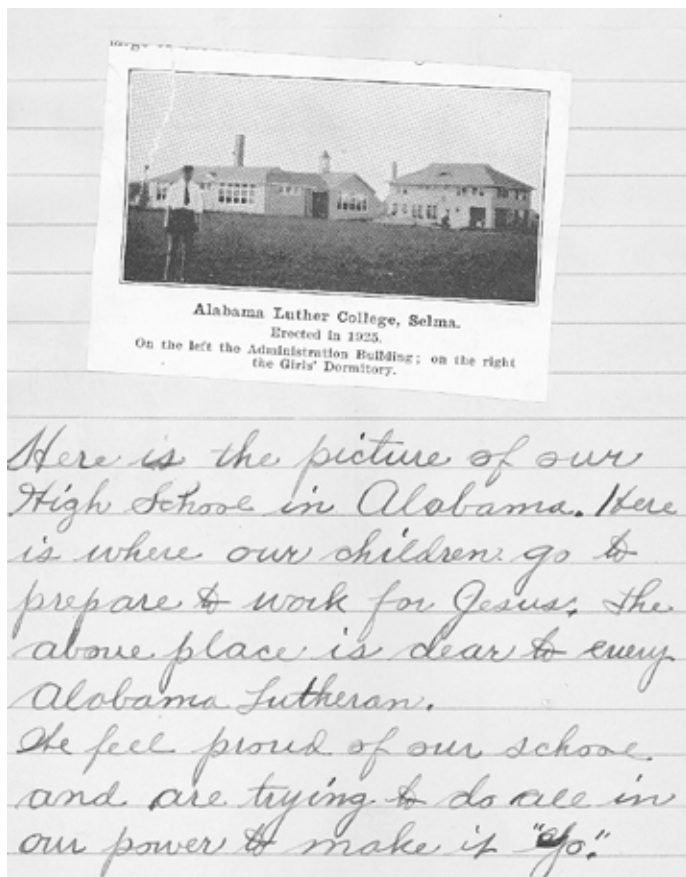
I am writing you to see if your conference will take our school under its auspices. If you will take our school under your auspices, we will give you the land, school building, and all of its contents to start with. If you cannot take our school, I beg the privilege to appeal to you to give us a donation to help us finish our chapel. No matter how little, any amount will be cheerfully and thankfully received.

This school is located near the center of Wilcox County, twelve miles from the county seat of Wilcox County, fifty-four miles from Selma, Alabama, two miles from the L and N Railroad, amid nearly 1,500 colored people. The region is friendly; both white and colored are interested in this school. I hope you will see your way clear to help us.

Yours humbly,
Rosa J. Young.²⁸

Drewes received the letter "like a Macedonian call," and sent a pastor named Nils Bakke to Wilcox County in December 1915.²⁹ Bakke, a native of Norway, was a veteran missionary to colored missions of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference, then affiliated with the Missouri Synod.³⁰ Young often praised the coming of the Lutheran church with its "pure gospel" coming to the "Black Belt" of rural Alabama, the central section of the state consisting of about nineteen counties where the soil is black, rich, and well suited for cotton. Young concluded: "Just as God often uses nature, creatures, disease and death as instruments to bring men to Jesus, so he used the little Mexican boll weevil as an instrument to bring the Lutheran Church into this dark, benighted Black Belt of Alabama to lead us poor sinners out of darkness into light."³¹

Bakke returned to Alabama in January to work with Young in founding Lutheran churches and schools. Bakke



Alabama Luther College, predecessor to Concordia Alabama, with an annotation by Young. Credit: Concordia Historical Institute

and Young worked hard to establish the church school, renamed Christ Lutheran, in the remote Rosebud community, among people who had never heard of Lutherans. Bakke also spent two hours a day teaching Young religion. As Young later recalled:

Pastor Bakke had much patience and manifested a world of love for the colored people and a deep interest in their welfare. In his classes there were always many who could not read. He would take time and teach them to sing the Lutheran hymns. He continued with this method until even the little children and ex-slaves could sing well a few stanzas of certain Lutheran hymns and recite the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed... [He] would walk on Saturday to Lee Bonner's blacksmith shop and stand in the heat of the roaring bellows talking above the blows of the hammers as he greeted men and told them about Jesus... [H]e would often limp to the grist mill and lean against the white dusty walls to talk to men, women, and children as they came for their sacks of meal, telling them of Jesus and His love for sinners.³²

A few short months later, on Palm Sunday, Christ Lutheran's ministry resulted in fifty-eight persons being baptized and seventy confirmed.³³ Young herself was the first black Lutheran convert in Alabama.³⁴



Rosa Young with students. Credit: Concordia Historical Institute

Students and their parents began asking for Lutheran schools and churches in their own communities. By the end of 1916, seven additional missions had been started. Their ministry continues. St. Paul in Oak Hill, five miles from Rosebud, was the second church founded and is still an active LCMS congregation. The pastor, Julius Jenkins, served for over twenty years as president of Concordia Selma. St. Andrew's in Vredenburgh became Immanuel Lutheran Church and remained active through 2014. It had been founded by Mary and Sarah McCants, twins who boarded with Rosa in Rosebud. Young remembered walking fifteen miles to attend the opening dedication service for their school. Our Savior in Possum Bend was started after Alex Etheridge, a sawmill worker, sat outside Christ Lutheran Church listening to the preaching and teaching and then

begged for a church and school in his community. In the 1930s Our Savior school was the largest in the Alabama field, with 107 students.³⁵ While the church and school no longer stand, the ministry continues. Among the first students were James Wiggins and his nine brothers and sisters. Wiggins later attended Alabama Lutheran Academy and Immanuel Lutheran Seminary, became a pastor, and married a Lutheran schoolteacher. Both his sons are LCMS pastors presently serving in the Florida-Georgia District.

Through Young's ministry, the sorrow of slavery was redeemed as former slaves were brought to faith. Mariah Dockery, a member of Our Savior and a former slave, never tired of telling others about Jesus. When her pastor came to comfort her in her last illness, she comforted him instead. Her last words were, "Lord, have you

come? Come on, Lord, I have been waiting for You."³⁶

Young tirelessly visited homes in the summers, often traveling miles on foot, sharing the good news with families who were so poor they couldn't feed her and made up their beds on newly picked cotton.³⁷ "I hunted for lost souls for Jesus as I hunted for money to building and maintain my first school."³⁸ In her dual role as teacher and missionary, Young was instrumental not only in her personal dream of establishing Christian training schools but also in evangelizing as she brought the message of the Lutheran church into other areas of the Black Belt.³⁹ She served in the mission schools, including Mount Carmel at Midway, on land owned by a judge and eventual governor of Alabama, B. M. Miller. The school had gone to weeds and waning interest since Young had first taught there fifteen

years earlier. As she reopened the school, the children's parents refused to give her money for books. "Miss Rosa, dese here chillun ain't goin' to learn nothin', and I ain't 'bout to buy no books."⁴⁰ Generous to a fault, Young bought all the children's books out of her own salary and paid local men to dig a well so that the students would have drinking water. She taught for nine years, building the school and the church, and eventually convinced parents to buy their own children's books and pay the modest tuition.⁴¹

Young traveled through the Midwest as well as the South, telling about the needs of her students and seeking support from Sunday Schools, Walther League Societies, the Lutheran Women's Missionary League, churches, and parochial schools.⁴² All the while and throughout her life she suffered episodes of sickness. She had suffered from rheumatism as a child and later had "serious surgeries" that she nearly didn't survive. The persecution from her own people was so intense that once as she lay deathly ill they said, "God is punishing her for bringing the Lutheran Church into Alabama."⁴³ She also suffered two heart attacks.⁴⁴

By 1946 there were thirty-five black Lutheran congregations in the Alabama field with a total membership of 3,212. There were thirty schools, which enrolled 1,227 children. Young had returned to Christ Lutheran in Rosebud to teach, believing she would end her teaching days there.⁴⁵ But there was one more call to serve. In 1946 Young was called to serve on the faculty of Alabama Lutheran Academy as matron of the women's dorm and teacher of religion, which she did from 1946 to 1961.⁴⁶ Alabama Lutheran Academy and College was founded in a home in Selma—then the fourth-largest city in the state—in 1922 to train teachers and pastors for the Alabama field. In 1925 the Mission Board bought thirteen acres and built the first two buildings, still standing today: Lynn Hall, named for the first president of the college, Ortho

Lynn, the only black pastor with a college degree; and Bakke Hall, named for Nils Bakke.⁴⁷

Ulmer Marshall, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church and School in Mobile, was in the eighth grade in 1960 and remembers Young as his very strict Bible teacher. "You didn't do *anything* during religion class but sit with your hands on your desk and pay attention." Marshall learned that lesson the hard way when he was punished one day for twirling a pencil on his desk. Memory work was critical: Young's class memorized several Bible passages and the Catechism. Marshall, like most of his male classmates, was encouraged to enter the ministry "Once Dr. Young laid hands on you, you knew you were headed to the ministry," he said.⁴⁸

James Wiggins Sr., a retired pastor, recalls his time at Alabama Lutheran Academy as a student in Young's eighth-grade Bible class. "She was such a caring person. You don't see that anymore. Whatever you needed, she would help."⁴⁹

Julius Jenkins was a teenager working in a cotton field in Wilcox County when his pastor, Moses Clark, came and told him his mother said he could go to Alabama Lutheran Academy.

My first question was, "How are we going to pay for me to attend?" Reverend Clark could not answer that question at that time, but he challenged me to venture out in faith. He was convinced that the Lord would supply the needed funds. I took that venture of faith and the Lord moved a ladies' guild to adopt me as their student and pay my educational expenses at the academy.⁵⁰

Jenkins reported that Young bought his textbooks. Once described by his Latin teacher Josie Ellwanger, the wife of Walter Ellwanger (himself president of Concordia Selma), as "the brightest person I have ever met," Jenkins became the eighth president

of the institution, serving from 1980 to 2007.⁵¹

During the Civil Rights era, the Synodical Conference churches in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana dissolved and were integrated into the formerly all-white Southern District of the LCMS. In 1961 Young was honored by the LCMS for her dedicated service with an honorary doctorate from Concordia Theological Seminary.⁵² She moved back to the family home in Hamburg, Wilcox County, a simple tin-roofed plank homestead down a long narrow dirt road on land her mother had bought years before. There she lived with her sister. Her pastor James Wiggins Sr., none other than her former student at Possum Bend, visited her with prayer and communion. His son, James Wiggins Jr., remembers tagging along with his pastor-father and younger brother Stephen to visit homebound church members in the backwoods of rural Wilcox County. He recalled the "sweet, sweet spirit" in Young's home as they prayed together and when his father gave her communion. "I remember Miss Young would always reach out her hand to touch my brother and me and ask, 'Are you boys going to be pastors when you grow up?' And we would always respond, 'Yes, ma'am.'"⁵³

Rosa Young died on June 30, 1971, and was buried near Christ Lutheran Church in Rosebud, in accordance with her final wishes.⁵⁴ Yet the ministry of the mother of black Lutheranism in Alabama, who overcame obstacles of poverty, sickness, and segregation, continues to this day. Her spiritual heirs include James Wiggins Jr., pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Florida; his brother Stephen, pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in East Point, Georgia; and their sister Karen, who is Assistant Professor of Education at Concordia University Irvine in southern California. There are dozens of second-generation LCMS black pastors whose heritage goes back to the backwoods of Alabama and the college in Selma that prepared

young adults for what Young considered the greatest calling: the teaching and preaching ministry. The Missouri Synod is also turning its attention to this great light in its history with the forthcoming documentary film, “The First Rosa,” due to come out later this year.⁵⁵ *LF*

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Notes

1. Thomas R. Noon, “Rosa Young,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, online at <encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1373> (this and all subsequent websites accessed January 15, 2015).
2. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, BEAREFACTS, Wilcox County, Alabama, online at <www.bea.gov/regional/bearfacts/action.cfm>.
3. Rosa J. Young, *Light in the Dark Belt* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 19.
4. *Ibid.*, 20.
5. *Ibid.*, 22.
6. *Ibid.*, 19.
7. *Ibid.*, 20.
8. *Ibid.*, 21.
9. *Ibid.*, 28.

10. *Ibid.*, 30.
11. *Ibid.*, 34.
12. Noon, n.p.
13. Young, 39–41.
14. Richard C. Dickinson, *Concordia College, Selma: The Miracle on Green Street* (n.p., n.d.), 15.
15. *Ibid.*, 15.
16. Young, 46.
17. *Ibid.*, 57.
18. *Ibid.*, 64.
19. *Ibid.*, 56.
20. *Ibid.*, ix: “I dedicate this book to our God-given white friends in Alabama, particularly to Mr. J. Lee Bonner... In the early day of our mission endeavors when help was sorely needed, these white people gave their moral and material support which made it possible for us to organize and to extend our mission work into new places.”
21. *Ibid.*, 67.
22. *Ibid.*, 76.
23. See <freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ajac/alwilcox.htm>.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Young, 82.
26. Bureau of Education Bulletin 1916, No. 33, *Negro Education* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1917), 89.
27. Noon, n.p.
28. Young, 104.
29. Dickinson, 10.
30. See <cyclopedia.lcms.org/display.asp?t1=B&word=BAKKE.NILSJ>.
31. Young, 89.
32. *Ibid.*, 120, 122.
33. *God’s Amazing Grace: A Centennial History of the Southern District of the Lutheran Church—*

- Missouri Synod, 1882–1982*, ed. James A. Ertl (Southern District Centennial Committee, 1982), 58.
34. *Ibid.*
 35. *A Tour Guide of Former Black Lutheran Synodical Conference/Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Congregations in the Black Belt Area* (Birmingham: Alabama Black Lutheran Heritage Association, n.d.), 17.
 36. Young, 157.
 37. *Ibid.*, 140.
 38. *Ibid.*, 162.
 39. Ertl, 58.
 40. Young, 186.
 41. *Ibid.*, 187.
 42. *Ibid.*, 170–6.
 43. *Ibid.*, 169.
 44. *Ibid.*, 22, 166–9, 189.
 45. *Ibid.*, 146.
 46. *Ibid.*, 192.
 47. Ertl, 66.
 48. Telephone interview with Ulmer Marshall, January 23, 2015.
 49. Personal interview with James Wiggins Sr., June 25, 2014.
 50. Dickinson, vi.
 51. Interview with Julius Jenkins, September 2001. Interview with Joanne Ellwanger, August 2012.
 52. Noon, n.p.
 53. “Rosa Young Planted Ministry Seeds,” *Concordia College Alabama Journal* (Fall/Winter 2012), 7.
 54. Noon, n.p.
 55. See <www.lcms.org/thefirstrosa>.