



Rosa Young

Rosa Young

A Persistent Christian Educator

by Victoria McAfee

“She taught more than 2,000 students, impacting their lives forever with her faith and her belief in the importance of education, at a time when education for children of sharecroppers was limited.”

—from the film, *The First Rosa*

Rosa J. Young was born on May 14, 1890, in rural Rosebud, Alabama, to Grant Young, an African Methodist Episcopal minister and his wife Nancy, the fourth of ten children. President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves but left many African-American families, like those in the Alabama Black Belt, in extreme poverty. This was the place Rosa grew up—a place filled with the disadvantaged amidst widespread immorality, people without proper clothing, no shoes, and very little food.

Yet, her mother taught her the Lord’s Prayer, and her grandmother encouraged her spiritually. At an early age, she began to constantly pray. She also had a thirst for learning, and eventually a longing to teach others. She gathered her siblings around and instructed them with only an old spelling book and the Bible. She loved to sing the old Negro spirituals and plantation songs as well.

Her parents and others took note of her exceptional mind, her spiritual appetite, and diligence in her work. Once she finished her basic schooling, her parents sent her to Selma for more education at Payne University. The city students bullied this country girl, and often she had to live with unkind landlords. But Rosa stayed the course. Rosa desired to return to Rosebud, one of the worst communities in the South, to teach the children, bring light into a deep dark place, and uplift the underprivileged.

Rosa prayed her way through the difficulties in Selma and eventually made several friends. She excelled in her studies, won scholastic awards, became editor of the school newspaper, and finished as valedictorian of her class. Her speech at the graduation moved the audience to tears. The theme of her message was “Serve others,” and she said, “‘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.”

After graduating, she received her teaching certificate and instructed children all over Alabama, praying for each student.

In 1912, she finally was able to travel back to her hometown, intending to start her own school, Rosebud Literary and Industrial School. She raised funds from people in the area, both black and white, oversaw the construction, and found teachers and textbooks for the school. Over 100

students attended the first year and over 200 the second. However, in 1914, the Mexican boll weevil attacked the cotton fields cutting off the region’s main source of income. The tuition payments from the parents ended. The support from the donors dwindled down.

Desperate to keep the school open, Rosa wrote to Booker T. Washington for assistance. He suggested she contact the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) in St. Louis. This organization historically established black churches and schools. They responded positively to Rosa, sending veteran missionary Rev. Nils J. Baake, in 1916, to Rosebud. As superintendent, he founded the first Lutheran school and church in the area, appointing Rosa as a teacher and advisor. The Lutheran denomination supplied the funding and materials.

Rev. Baake, a preacher committed to spreading the Gospel, included solid Christian-based teaching to both the children and the families in the area. After only four months in the area, he baptized 58 people. Rosa was among the first of Baake’s converts. Although she had several spiritual experiences as a child, she never really understood salvation. Under Rev. Baake’s biblical teaching, he gave her a clear understanding.

For several years, Rev. Baake and Rosa traveled around the area setting up churches and schools. Four years after Baake arrived, the two of them had started 35 congregations and 30 Lutheran schools in such Alabama towns as Buena Vista, Tilden, Tinela, Midway, and Ingomar. In 1919, Rev. Baake had to leave because of health reasons. But he left behind a very capable missionary—Rosa Young. She continued to teach, relentlessly visiting families to spread the Gospel message of Jesus Christ while raising the necessary funds to keep the schools and churches functioning. She faced opposition, mainly from those who failed to understand her involvement with the Lutheran church. She also suffered from heart issues as a result of exhaustion and childhood diseases. Laboring nonstop, without breaks or a vacation, characterized her work. In 1930, she first published her autobiography, which the Lutherans republished in 1950.

At the age of 52, she joined the faculty at Alabama Lutheran Academy, later named Concordia College Alabama. It served high school and junior college students, primarily for the preparation of teachers and pastors. She served there for 15 years, and the LCMS honored her with a doctorate degree from Concordia Theological Seminary in 1961, before she died 9 years later. She was both the first African American and woman to be honored in this way by the Lutheran church.



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