

LOWER MIAMI

A long history of welcome

by Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

Lower Miami Church of the Brethren in Dayton, Ohio, in Jefferson Township, has a long history of welcome. This has included intentional work, beginning in the 1950s, to become a multiracial, intercultural congregation.

In decades past, that work created the church home in which Robert Jackson grew up.

Today, it is creating a home for the children of asylum seekers from Colombia and Nicaragua.

Welcome for the Black community

When his family moved to Dayton around 1965, Jackson was a young boy. Lower Miami had integrated long before—in 1954—one of the first two churches in Dayton to integrate. His parents, Robert C. and Mattie Jackson, didn't know Lower Miami and didn't know that his mother's sister and husband, Minva and Tom Reid, were already attending.

Mattie Jackson's uncle was a minister at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Dayton. The Rev. Broaddus was well known, a respected leader among the Black Baptist ministers in the city. "If you were high in the Black society in Dayton, you went to Tabernacle Baptist," Jackson said.

However, Robert C. Jackson's job coaching high school football in Jefferson Township meant a long commute. "Dad was living with his sister in Middletown, 20 miles away, until we found a house about two miles from Lower Miami and a half mile from the school."

It happened that one of the football

players was from Lower Miami and repeatedly asked "Coach Jackson" to come to church with him. "Dad told Mom he would have to check out the church to stop Donny Noffsinger bugging him," Jackson remembered.

The Jacksons liked Lower Miami right away. Their family is musical, and the children were immediately invited into the children's choir. So they attended again. And again. Jackson's parents went on to become deacons and leaders in the church. His father served a term as moderator.

"If you went to the church, you were family," Jackson said. "I was in first or second grade. Some of the kids were picking on me in the playground. It wasn't my friends who stopped them, it was the people in my Sunday school, who were older, who were saying, 'That's my little brother, you don't mess with him.'"

Jackson grew up mentored by role models in the congregation. "We had so many high-quality people, is the best way to describe it," he said. "If someone at Lower Miami accomplished something, it was like we all accomplished something."

His memory is of being "taken along to everything." A leading Black physician in the community, Dr. Munson, would take care of him after school. A member of the Foust family, who

were in construction and plumbing, showed him how to change a faucet. One church member became head of a premiere medical lab. Another worked at Wright Patterson Air Base with one of the Black women mathematicians featured in the movie *Hidden Figures*, before she went to work for NASA. The congregation had electricians, builders, teachers—all contributing to Jackson's informal education and personal growth.



Lower Miami timeline

1805 A congregation is established in a farming area on the outskirts of Dayton, founded by elder Jacob Miller. It is the first Brethren congregation west of the Miami River. Meetings are held in homes and outdoors.

1811 After some contention, a committee of elders from Virginia is asked in to help. The congregation is divided into four churches: Lower Miami, Lower Stillwater, Bear Creek, and Wolf Creek.

1840 Preaching begins to shift from German to English.

1845 Land is donated for the first church building.

1880s Miami Valley is "ground zero" for a three-way split of the Brethren movement. Progressive leader Henry Holsinger preaches from Lower Miami's front steps one Sunday afternoon.

1912 A pulpit replaces the ministers' bench.

1937 The church votes to have musical instruments on special occasions.

1940s The area shifts from rural to suburban.



Courtesy of Nan Eshbaugh

A particular morning spent with “Mr. Noffsinger,” owner of a large real estate business, is a vivid memory. Jackson’s mother was at a women’s meeting at church, and Ray Noffsinger took him along on errands around town. It was at the bank that a teller asked, “Whose little boy is that?” using the N word. Noffsinger said, “It’s my son, a boy from church,” then instructed the teller to pull his accounts and immediately took them to the bank’s chief competitor.

As a child, Jackson didn’t understand what had happened—he was just happy to get two lollipops in one day. His parents later explained it to him.

During the 1970s, at a time when the Dayton city schools were under a court order to desegregate, a Dayton newspaper looking for successful examples of integrated communities interviewed Lower Miami pastor Robert Martin. Asked how many Black and white families were in the church, “the Reverend said, ‘I don’t know. You don’t seem to understand one thing: it’s just Lower Miami families,’” Jackson recalled. “Finally, the Reverend had to pull out the church directory and had to look through it to see who was white and who was Black.”

Martin’s response to the reporter exemplifies the Lower Miami identity for Jackson. That identity continues today, he said. It includes the relatively recent decision to become open and affirming, which Jackson said is part and parcel of the practice of updating the church’s mission statement every decade. It is illustrated by the way the church “adopted” and prayed for one of the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram. The church has flown a Nigerian flag. It has flown a rainbow flag.

Such displays of inclusion have attracted animosity, even vandalism—but they also attract new people to the church.

It’s a deeply Brethren identity, with an attitude of Christian humility. Jackson likens Lower Miami to “that old Ford pickup that has none of the fancy stuff, but it still starts, kicks over, and runs even on the coldest day of the year.”

As he overheard a township trustee say, “Those folks at that church are so different. They do it, but they never talk about it.”

Welcome for refugees and asylum seekers

Although the Ohio winter was a shock for people from Colombia, Luciano and Karen and their boys have settled in. The week after they arrived, in late 2021, the oldest boy had his 10th birthday and the youngest his 6th. “Lots of love surrounded them,” the church reported in the Southern Ohio and Kentucky District newsletter.

The Miami Valley Immigration Coalition (MVIC) and district churches helped meet the family’s basic needs—food, housing, utilities, transportation, education, work, an immigration lawyer, and perhaps most importantly, friendship and community. The boys are attending school, their parents have been taking ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, and official papers requesting asylum and work authorizations were filed.

“Karen and Luciano moved into their housing in July, a next step towards independence,” said Jan Futrell, one of those leading the effort. “They have work authorization and fulltime jobs and continue their long, challenging asylum process.”

The urge to provide the family with a proper welcome inspired church members, neighbors, and the MVIC team to learn Spanish. There is now a Spanish class at the church, currently taught by Karen, who also translates for children’s

Courtesy of Phyllis Angeny Hochstetler



1950s Black families begin attending. Pastor Edward Angeny is key in integrating the church. The church hosts refugees from Eastern Europe and the Netherlands.

1955 Ten members are delegates to the Church and Race Institute.

1958 Loren Blackwell is Lower Miami’s first Black delegate to Annual Conference.

1964-1966 Lower Miami participates in a “Comparative Case Study of Church Desegregation in a Midwestern Metropolitan Area.”

1970s The congregation resettles a Vietnamese family.

1975 René Calderón, of Ecuadoran descent, is Lower Miami’s first minority pastor.

1977 Karen Calderón is the first woman pastor.

1984 The church joins the Sanctuary Movement and shelters a family from Guatemala.



messages and takes a turn helping in the nursery. Luciano made flan for a fiesta the Spanish class held for the congregation. Although Catholic by background, Luciano and Karen and their sons have become fixtures at Lower Miami.

The church respects the asylum seekers' determination to become independent, while continuing to maintain a loving relationship.

All of this is not new to Lower Miami. The church has hosted refugees many times in past decades, from Vietnam, Guatemala, Bosnia, Rwanda. Jackson recalled stories about a Hungarian family taken in after the uprising following World War II. Phyllis Angeny Hochstetler, whose father, Edward Angeny, was instrumental in integrating the church as a pastor in the 1950s, remembered hosting refugee families from Eastern Europe and the Netherlands. In 2019, the congregation declared itself a sanctuary church for a second time, the first having been in 1984.

Before the family from Colombia arrived, the church had been preparing to host asylum seekers from Honduras. However, José and Nancy and their children were returned to Mexico under Title 42, after presenting themselves at the border asking for asylum. Said Futrell, "They continue to live in the challenging reality of Tijuana as they wait an opportunity to carry their asylum request forward in the US. The MVIC is able to send a small monthly offering to help them pay for safe housing."

In the meantime, a Nicaraguan man named Hansell and his two young children were welcomed last August. They are living in the Lower Miami guest space and participate in worship and other activities, Futrell said, "bringing a strong faith witness into the community" as well as "many challenges and boundless energy with very young children." More celebrations have ensued, with one of the


children celebrating her second birthday during an after-worship gathering.

God's family

The welcoming nature of the congregation and its strong peace and justice stance are why Futrell became a member. She first encountered Lower Miami when she was involved with migration advocacy and worked at the Dayton Peace Museum. "I walked in, and here was this church that was deeply integrated," she said. "I had never seen a church so deeply interconnected across those boundaries."

Futrell has marveled at the growth and change in the congregation because of relationships with asylum seekers. The experience has ranged from joyful witness to a family's growth, to shared grief at the dangers asylum seekers face, to anger at the invisibility of asylum seekers in the US. The church has learned to live in the moment and be patient, because "nothing's clear" about the asylum process.

Futrell remembers the first day she visited Lower Miami as a watershed moment for her. It also was a watershed moment for the church, the day Lower Miami decided to become open and affirming. At the church business meeting that day she observed "an amazing process" and asked, "What did you guys do to get to this moment?" It was clear to her that church members had arrived at that decision from very different starting points.

"This is what God's family looks like, it has all kinds of wonderful variety," said Futrell. 

Robert Jackson, a member of the Racial Justice Team of Southern Ohio and Kentucky District and the Standing with People of Color Committee of Annual Conference, and Jan Futrell, a Lower Miami member on the MVIC asylum team, gave interviews for this article. Former pastor Nan Erbaugh and associate member Phyllis Angeny Hochstetler contributed photos and information about Lower Miami history.

1992 Lower Miami partners with the Interfaith Hospitality Network to serve homeless families.

1995-1997 The church hosts families from Bosnia and Rwanda.

2002 Edward Pugh is Lower Miami's first Black pastor.

2005 The church celebrates its 200th anniversary.

2019 Lower Miami again declares itself a sanctuary church.

2021 It welcomes asylum seekers from Colombia.

2022 The church welcomes asylum seekers from Nicaragua.

Sources include a history of Lower Miami written by Diana Wheaton, including sections of a 1920 Southern Ohio District history.