

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

924 W. State St.
AHI # 55952

Construction date: 1923
Architect: Erhard Brielmeier

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is one of Milwaukee's three oldest African American religious congregations, along with St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal, founded in 1869, and Mount Olive Baptist, later Calvary Baptist, founded in 1895.



St. Ben's had its origins in 1908 when Captain Lincoln Valle, a Black Catholic layman and newspaper editor, moved to Milwaukee to promote Catholicism among the African American community. Valle's efforts were so successful that the Catholic Archdiocese formally established a mission to the Black community in 1909. The mission was staffed by Capuchin Franciscan priests and the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Initially housed in rented storefronts and later a converted house, the chapel was dedicated to St. Benedict the Moor, a 16th-century Black Franciscan friar. The mission started operating a day school in 1912. In the early 1920s St. Ben's established the first coeducational parochial boarding school in the Midwest; many of the students came from poor or single-parent households in Milwaukee's African American community.⁶

In 1923, St. Ben's began plans for a new church. Ernest G. Miller, president of Miller Brewing Company, contributed \$63,000 to fund the construction of the church (the present building), which was dedicated in March 1924. Miller also donated \$100,000 toward the purchase of the former Marquette University High School located at N. 10th St. and State St., which St. Ben's repurposed as a boarding school which operated from 1925 until 1954. In addition to education, St. Ben's also focused on providing medical care to the African American community. In 1931, the parish built St. Anthony Hospital, the first fully integrated private hospital in Milwaukee.⁷

St. Anthony Hospital was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. The former St. Ben's school was demolished in 1964 to make room for the new freeway. Although the racial demographics of its congregation have changed, St. Benedict the Moor church remains an active parish whose physical building retains sufficient integrity to convey its historic significance. Because of its historic significance for association with Milwaukee's Black community, St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is potentially eligible under *Criterion A: Black Ethnic Heritage*.

⁶ Historic Preservation Study Report: St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church. City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development, 1997, 3.

⁷ Steven M. Avella, "African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee: St. Benedict the Moor Church and School," *Milwaukee History* 17 (Autumn-Winter 1994), 77-83.