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Detroit coffee shop in church was home to civil rights warriors

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Numerous homes and buildings have disappeared around the infamous intersection of 12th and Clairmount since the 1967 rebellion detonated on the corner.

One survivor, still standing a block north on 12th (long renamed Rosa Parks) is a modest, red-brick church that has been reborn as a popular coffee house, bar and restaurant. Accessorized with pews, stained glass and an organ, it attracts a clientele from the neighborhood and across the region. But its caffeine-fueled vibrancy today obscures a century-long past, one that is deeply entwined with Black Detroit's long struggle for civil rights and economic justice.

That's because, unknown to most customers, the church long ago was the home of two of the city's most dynamic preachers, the Rev. Albert Cleage Jr. and the Rev. James Wadsworth Jr., both of whom became legends for their fights for Black self-determination and for starting other churches that live on today as bulwarks of the city's spiritual and activist landscape.

The coffeehouse is called The Congregation, at Rosa Parks and Atkinson. Its existence reflects another chapter in city history that has been playing out for more than a decade — entrepreneurs helping to revitalize old neighborhoods.

The co-owner, Betsy Murdoch, lives nearby, and developed the abandoned property with an eye toward serving the residents of the near northwest side.

“We get people from all over,” said Murdoch, “but our focus goes back to what we can provide for our neighbors.”

Church marks a return home

The church was designed circa 1921 by Spiers & Rohn, the architects behind Detroit’s Sweetest Heart of Mary Catholic Church and the onetime Ann Arbor train depot that houses the Gandy Dancer restaurant. The church was dedicated as Unity Lutheran Church in 1923. Under its one and only pastor, the Rev. Sylvester Boger, Unity celebrated its last Sunday communion service in 1951.

The United Presbyterian Church bought the building and opened St. Mark’s Community Church “to serve the growing northwest Negro residential area,” according to a 1951 Free Press article. Its new pastor, Cleage, was a Detroit native who graduated from what is now Wayne State University and had served as pastor at churches in Massachusetts, Kentucky and California.

Cleage came home with his wife and two young daughters, one of whom, Kristin Cleage, has documented the family history on her website, findingeliza.com.

Cleage Jr. “often wrote home asking his family to help him find a church in Detroit,” Kristin Cleage wrote. Indeed, Cleage Jr’s father, Albert Sr., and an uncle, Henry Cleage, organized the Presbyterian congregation and “my father was called to be the pastor.” She added: “They started with 90 members and increased to over 300 during the following two years.”

But Pastor Cleage and his uncle feuded over the church’s mission and the pastor’s increasing civil rights activism.

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“By the spring of 1953, they had reached an impasse over who was in charge and whether the focus of the church should be on its own members or on the larger community,” wrote

Kristin Cleage. “An emotional church meeting in March 1953 caused a split.

“Dismissal of Reverend Cleage was the result of protests lodged with the committee by five church members, including Henry W. Cleage, the pastor’s uncle,” noted the Chicago Defender. “The group objected to the young minister’s program of cultural and social activities, which, they said, interfered with the spiritual functions of the church.”

A 1968 Detroit Free Press article described Pastor Cleage as weary of his uncle’s focus on “excessive piety.”

About 300 congregants left St. Mark with Cleage and formed a new church, eventually known as Central Congregational Church. At its 1967 Easter service, Cleage unveiled an 18-foot painting depicting Jesus and his mother Mary as Black, designed to promote what Cleage called Black Christian Nationalism, shocking for its time. The church became known as the Shrine of the Black Madonna, which became a launching pad for African American politicians and publisher of the influential election guide known as the Black Slate. Cleage, who died at age 88 in 2000, also took the African name of Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman.

After Cleage’s departure, St. Mark’s Church was helmed by Wadsworth for 13 years. In an echo of Cleage’s early troubles, Wadsworth was Detroit NAACP chapter president when he left St. Mark’s in June 1966, saying Presbyterian leaders demanded his resignation because they didn’t like his emphasis on civil rights activities.

“I consider that being a minister means that a man must be involved with community activities, and I also consider my involvement with the NAACP as a vital part of my ministry,” Wadsworth told the Free Press in 1966.

Many congregants backed Wadsworth and formed the new Fellowship Chapel, which Wadsworth led until his death in 1986 at age 63. Fellowship is now one of the city’s largest congregations and a political powerhouse, led by the Rev. Wendell Anthony, the current president of the Detroit NAACP.

Wadsworth also was a grassroots politician and a friend to Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, who also appointed him deputy director of the city’s parks and recreation department.

“I can’t think of anyone who’s active in education, civil rights, the church and politics and kept all those activities going at the same time,” Young said at Wadsworth’s funeral. “That was Father Jim, and he made it look easy.”

Neighbors give business the 'green light'

When Murdoch, 33, moved into the nearby Boston-Edison neighborhood, she and her husband, Mark Mondary, often hosted get-togethers with neighbors Amy Peterson and her husband, Antonio Luck. Peterson is the co-founder of Rebel Nell, the enterprise that hires Detroiters to make jewelry from peeling Detroit graffiti.

“We’d have barbecues in each other’s yards and dream we wouldn’t have to drive somewhere to get coffee or eat out,” said Murdoch. By then, the church had been empty for several years. The couples purchased it for an undisclosed sum in 2016.

“Before we even bought the building, we went to the Boston-Edison homeowners association and presented our idea,” said Murdoch. “We passed out flyers to the houses on Atkinson and other streets asking if they wanted some place to walk to like this — and that was the green light.”

They replaced the roof, plastered the walls, restored some stained-glass windows, removed red carpeting and 2 inches of adhesive to reveal original maple flooring. The bar is made from old pews. It took four years to navigate through rezoning, re-modeling and licensing.

“I think after a four-year period, people lost hope,” said Murdoch. “We were so deep into it, we didn’t realize what our opening meant for the community.”

The Congregation made its debut March 5, 2020, days before the COVID-19 pandemic halted normal commerce. Murdoch kept the establishment open by herself, providing carryout items. And, she says, “providing hope that we’d get through it.”

Murdoch is now hoping to restore the nonworking organ. The expansive outside deck with wide stairs can easily be outfitted with cushions to provide bleacher-style seating for future concerts. They’ve bought an adjacent house with the idea of making it another restaurant.

For \$25 a month, patrons can have all the coffee they want and hang out at tables on the deck and yard, or the couches inside.

The owners say they are profoundly aware of the significance of their location. “Just knowing that there used to be a lot of activity here — chock full of businesses and mom and pop shops,” said Murdoch, “made it important to bring it back.”

The Congregation, thecongregationdetroit.com, is located at 9321 Rosa Parks Blvd, Detroit.

Patricia Montemurri is a retired Detroit Free Press staff writer and most recently the author of “Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters of Michigan” and “Mercy High School of Michigan.”