

Church Seeks to Help Revitalize Detroit

Church of God in Christ Bishop P.A. Brooks says ministries have a duty to build in their communities

In a cluster of barren fields on Detroit's east side, Bishop P.A. Brooks sees the future, for his church and people in need far beyond its doors. Soon the fields will be home to COGIC Villages, a housing and retail development of the New St. Paul Tabernacle (NSPT) Church of God in Christ.

The development is one of several projects that Brooks, New St. Paul pastor and president of the church's nonprofit housing corporation, is orchestrating to help revitalize Detroit, a city plagued with urban blight. Churches, Brooks says, have a duty to build in their communities.

"We looked at our community and saw houses boarded up and deterioration of the community," said Brooks, 73, who founded the 2,100-member church 52 years ago with his wife and mother-in-law. "We can't let the community go down. We have to bring life, not just spiritual life, but practical life for other people. If we don't help people we aren't serving in the ministry of Jesus Christ."

In recent months the media have been splattered with news reports about

Detroit's \$300 million budget deficit and massive layoffs. Though the city has attracted Major League Baseball's 2005 All-Star Game, the 2006 Super Bowl and splashy new downtown developments, a recent Time magazine article ranked Detroit Mayor Kwame M. Kilpatrick among the worst in the country because of his management of city funds and personnel.

But while some doubt his city's economic viability, Brooks sees opportunity. "People say Detroit is bad, but the glass is not half empty, it's half full," he said. Developing abandoned areas is "how new life is given to these urban centers."

Brooks says the New St. Paul Tabernacle Non-Profit Housing Corporation developed a limited license corporation with Metro Educational Concepts Inc. (MECI) to erect homes and business areas throughout the city. Their first project, COGIC Villages, is a three-phase development all on Detroit's east side.

Michael Bartley, executive director of MECI, a nonprofit community development corporation, explained the project: Gratiot 24 is the first area that will have 24 two- and three-bedroom townhouses and at least 50 studio, and one- and two bedroom garden apartments for those with low incomes, including seniors.

The second phase, Cathedral Place, targets COGIC's Northeast Michigan Cathedral, which is the jurisdictional headquarters, and the surrounding area. Initial plans include a Cathedral face-lift and construction of 45 new homes on city-obtained land. The third phase is Eastown Residential, neighborhoods of single-family homes in which owners pay mortgages in the range of 40 percent to 60 percent of the median residential income.

Brooks said NSPT Non-Profit Housing Corporation and MECI received a \$10,000 grant from a local bank to complete the application process to the state of Michigan to get approval

for their plans. They also were able to obtain, through another bank, a \$3 million guarantee from bank investors who provided monies for home mortgages.

Henry Hagood, director of development activities for the Detroit Planning and Development Department, says the city “fully supports Bishop Brooks. He’s filling in the holes in the community, bringing back the housing stock. He has a built-in market. The faith-based market can have a major impact on what we’re doing in the city.”

Brooks is a member of the Church of God in Christ’s General Board and bishop of the Northeast Michigan Jurisdiction, where he oversees 90 churches. His rebuilding work has been so successful the U.S. government invited him to a policy meeting based on his “excellent reputation and proven ability,” said Ryan Streeter, director of the Department of Housing and Urban Development Center for Faith Based and Community Initiatives.

In the last decade, Brooks has implemented several faith-based ventures, including a 57-unit seniors complex located on the church’s grounds. In 2001, NSPT teamed with the nonprofit Faith Community Homebuyers Program (FCHP) to educate people about mortgages.

The Wayne County First-Time Homebuyer Program contracted

Brooks' homebuyer's program to manage its down payment housing assistance program. And that program made all the difference in Paul Schumacher's dream of owning a home.

"I had gone through the orientation," said Schumacher, a licensed builder. "As time went on I realized I was not in a position where I could buy one. I was going through a physical and emotional crisis at the time. ... Without the down payment program I would not have been able to pursue [a home] otherwise."

Schumacher is living testament to the impact of Brooks' vision. "We've got to improve the quality of life for other people," Brooks said. "As Isaiah 58:12 says, we have to build up the waste places. We have to be in on the front end of development.

The church can no longer sit and let outsiders take it. We have to get in on it. We have the opportunity to breathe new life."

RHONDA J. SMITH IN DETROIT