

FALL 2005 VOL. 26 • NO. 11 • \$4.00

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"VOICE OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY"  
PUBLISHED BY THE CONSTRUCTION ASSOCIATION OF MICHIGAN

# PRAISING THE WORK OF GOD

TABERNACLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH — DETROIT

BY WENDI SAWCHUK, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS COLLINS  
AND RONCELLI, INC.



RONCELI

The seating within the sanctuary is situated “in-the-round” so that everyone faces the pulpit at the center.

**W**hen the Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church first opened its doors in northwest Detroit over 80 years ago, services were held in a simple wood structure. Since then, the church has grown to include over 5,000 members and several different ministries and programs. As one of the oldest Baptist churches in Detroit, the Tabernacle’s mission and purpose has always been to exalt the Savior through worship and praise, expound the scripture through Biblical preaching and teaching, embrace the saved through membership and fellowship, equip the saints through Christian education and discipleship for the work of the ministry, and encourage the struggling through ministries for the whole person and evangelize the sinner through the sharing of the good news, all empowered by the indwelling

presence of the Holy Spirit, all done to the glory of God.

In order to uphold their mission, as well as accommodate the growing membership and service, the Tabernacle family realized the need for a new church facility. The spacious 106,000-square-foot, two-story building located on the corner of Grand River and West Grand Boulevard reinvigorates the spirit of the membership, as well as provides several multifunctional areas in which to educate, praise and worship.

#### MAINTAINING COMMUNITY WORSHIP

A new Tabernacle facility had been in the planning stages since the mid-1990s. The pastor at that time was the late Dr. Frederick G. Sampson, who was a nationally-known orator and evangelist. Dr. Sampson was the genesis of the entire project and was heavily involved with all

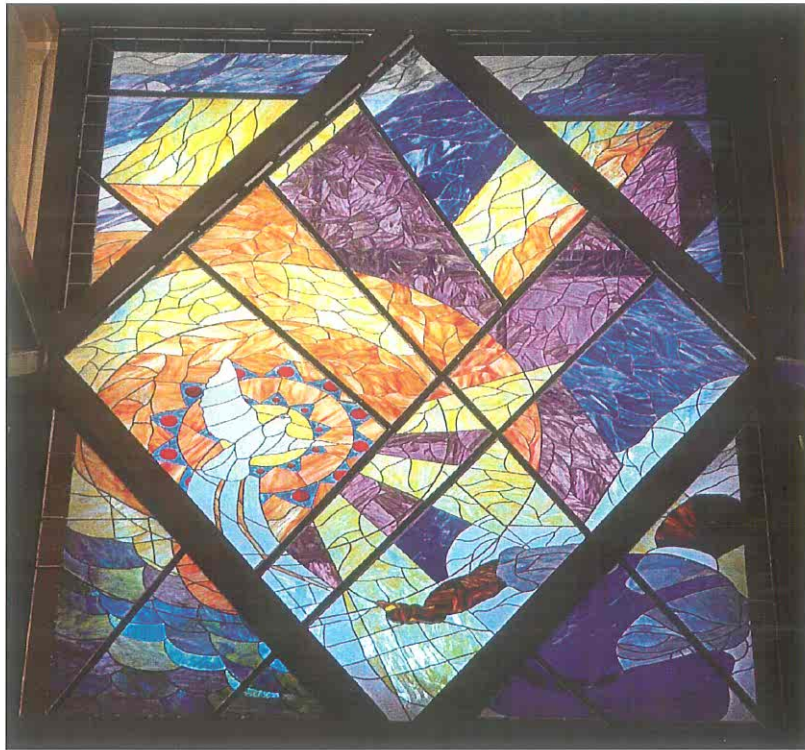
aspects of the initial planning and design phases. Although he realized that the church had several pressing needs, his first and foremost vision was to relocate within the same community as the original facility. “Once the idea came to fruition that we were going to build a brand new facility, it was Dr. Sampson’s vision to do it in the same community because he saw that many other churches had already moved out of the area. He wanted to stay here and the officers of the church fully agreed with his decision,” said Isaac Washington, chairman of the board of deacons, Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church.

The original Tabernacle church was located about a mile away from the current location, across I-96. As the membership grew, so did the actual physical building. Over 80 years, the church had expanded until they were completely landlocked. “Initially, we

had looked into simply expanding the existing facility, but due to the fact that we were located in a residential neighborhood, we had too many building constraints, such as height and length," said Dwight E. Blakey, chief operations officer, D.E.B. Enterprises, Inc. (project manager/owner's representative). "So we opted to search for a new location. We had a need for expanded and more technologically advanced worship, education and community spaces. We also had a need to maintain the continuity with the core community that we had been servicing for over 80 years."

For Dr. Sampson's vision to be realized, Blakey and his team had the challenge of finding a large piece of land in the community that would accommodate a structure more than twice the size of the original church. Usually, such pieces of land are a rare find in the city, which is why many larger churches decide to build in the suburbs where land is abundant. "In fact, the old facility was actually built by members of the church," said Blakey. "A lot of prominent men and women in the city, state and country had their beginnings in this community. That was one of the important reasons to maintain our presence in this area. We wanted to make sure that those ties were not severed."

Fortunately, the team was able to find just the right piece of land to accommodate the church's needs. The open site on the corner of Grand River and West Grand Boulevard was the former home of Northwestern High School, as well as a middle school and elementary school. After Northwestern High School relocated further east down West Grand Boulevard, the other schools were torn down as well. "There was really no other location providing access to 7.5 acres of land in Detroit. It was just not available," said Blakey. Not only was the site the perfect fit for their new church, it satisfied Dr. Sampson's vision of staying within the core west side Detroit community.



**This stained glass piece, created by local Detroit artist Hubert Massey, is located high above the pulpit.**

**“We had a need to maintain the continuity with the core community that we had been servicing for over 80 years.”**

**Dwight E. Blakey**  
Chief Operations Officer  
D.E.B. Enterprises, Inc.

#### **A MULTI-FUNCTIONAL DESIGN**

With the site selected, architect Hamilton Anderson Associates, Detroit, was given the task of creating a facility that could house a variety of functions, while at the same time follow the urban infrastructure of the surrounding area. The spacious 7.5 acres of land prominently located at the corner of two main Detroit thoroughfares gave the design team ample opportunity to fulfill the vision. The two-story, 106,000-square-foot facility is positioned directly at the intersection of both roads. Since Grand River crosses West Grand Boulevard at a 27-degree angle, the intersection created a

wedge-shaped piece of land at the corner. "The concept design stems from the vertical, heaven-to-earth inspiration of the Word of God, which is being delivered by the minister from the pulpit to the congregation, who in turn, takes and spreads the Word to the community," said Rainy Hamilton, Jr., AIA, NOMA, principal designer and president, Hamilton Anderson Associates. "Locating the pulpit and the large volume of the sanctuary at the narrow end of the site helps create a gateway and focal point at this major traffic intersection. The angular shape of the site and the concept of spreading the Word gave influence to positioning the "wings" of the building along the major street

arteries. The wings recreate the urban edge of each street and provide open arms to welcome the congregation from the parking area into a landscaped courtyard."

Another important aspect for Hamilton Anderson was to blend the physical structure in with the surrounding community. Although 106,000 square feet seemed like a massive facility, the designers were able to distribute everything among two floors and three main sections that radiate out from the intersection. The main section is the sanctuary and chapel (located at the crux of Grand River and West Grand Boulevard) where all of the sermons and services take place. One side of the sanctuary is the church administration section along Grand River and the other side is the ministerial, education and fellowship section along West Grand Boulevard. There are three entrances into the building. The main entrance, located off of the large parking lot behind the church, leads to the vestibule with direct access to the first floor of the sanctuary. The other two entrances are located off of both main roads. The City of Detroit permitted the designers to include a drop-off/staging lane off of the West Grand Boulevard entrance that can be used to stack cars during a funeral procession or as a general drop off lane. At press



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**Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church is prominently located at the corner of Grand River Avenue and West Grand Boulevard in Detroit.**

time, this type of lane had been the only one permitted by the City.

The materials chosen for the exterior of the church also lend to its subdued elegance. Natural-toned masonry block is used as the base of the building as a symbol of the strength and stability of Tabernacle within the community. Halfway up the exterior, the material changes from darker masonry block to lighter metal panels. The materials announce the presence of Tabernacle in Detroit without appearing flashy or garish. The design team also included some architectural aspects that reflect the gothic style of the original

church, as well as many other church structures based in Detroit. "We made hints to the gothic architecture with the buttresses that are above the sanctuary," said Russell Baltimore, project designer, Hamilton Anderson Associates. "It's where everything comes together in the ceiling. They fold over and come down along the side." Just outside of the main entrance is a courtyard composed of seat walls and brick pavers that appear to radiate out from the church. Again, this symbolizes the concept of the word of God radiating out from the church to the community.

The most challenging aspect of the design was the 2,000-seat sanctuary, which is basically the focus of the facility. There are 1,500 seats on the floor and 500 in the balcony. Directly adjacent to the sanctuary is the 150-seat chapel used for smaller services, as well as to hold overflow from the sanctuary. The shape of the sanctuary space is circular in order to situate the seating "in-the-round" to face the pulpit at the

