





THE SOUL OF THE ARTS DISTRICT

DALLAS'
HISTORIC BLACK
CHURCH
GETS A
RENOVATION
THANKS TO
AN UNLIKELY
PARTNER.

BY WALTON MUYUMBA // PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANNY RODRIGUEZ

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QUATTING IN ITS CORNER

of the Arts District, St. Paul United Methodist Church is dwarfed by One Arts Plaza to its immediate south and by the rising concrete pedestals holding up Woodall Rodgers to its north. Even the polished and expanded Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts across Routh Street to the west seems to mock the stocky old church.

Passing St. Paul along the access road or Routh during the years of the Arts District's expansion, one would

be forgiven for not noticing the church. The building seemed like an afterthought left in the corner to accent the gleaming new structures around it with antique heft and gritty charm.

But the church has not been empty or quiet for 137 years. In fact, it's one of Dallas' oldest black churches. Though initially overlooked by Arts District developers as they worked on the recent expansion, St. Paul will this month complete a unique \$5 million renovation project that will ensure the church remains a vital part of the sector. The project was unique because it began not at St. Paul but at another Methodist church, this one in a distinctly different setting.

In 2005, senior minister Reverend Mark Craig, of Highland Park United Methodist Church, decided that he wanted to protect and preserve Dallas' inner-city churches. With a seed contribution from one of his flock, developer Harlan Crow, Craig targeted St. Paul.

One small problem with delivering surprising, unsolicited gifts to anyone is the skepticism the gift will likely engender: "Thanks, but why me? And what are your *real* intentions?" In this case, the small problem was enlarged because the benefactor was a wealthy, conservative, predominantly white church, and the recipient was a small, working-class black church. Even more, given black history in Freedman's Town, the area we now call Uptown, worries of encroachment, ownership, and even racism would have been understandable.

Reverend Craig understood this skepticism as both historical and congregational; most churches don't want intrusion from other churches. In fact, as Reverend Craig explains, there was some hesitation from Highland Park United Methodist's members because "most people don't want to help other peoples' churches."

St. Paul's renewal actually tells two intersecting stories: one about an interracial, intradenominational alliance and a second, larger story about the permanent significance of a neighborhood's history. The main characters in this first story are really Elzie Jr., senior pastor of St. Paul, and Bob Kaminski, a Highland Park United Methodist member and board member of the AT&T Performing Arts Center. Reverend Craig says the two men "represented their churches in marvelously sacrificial ways" as they worked to allay fears in both congregations.

Craig tapped Kaminski to serve as an intermediary between the two organizations. Kaminski says he acted as "a committee of one"

representing Highland Park United Methodist, helping to construct a working agreement concerning the monetary gift and developing a partnership with Pastor Odom.

When Pastor Odom talks about the spirit of cooperation and collaboration between the two churches, he mentions pulpit swaps and choir exchanges, but he's more excited by the sense that the project helped the churches step "beyond what the world says about who we are." Reaching past skepticism and "the scent of racism" still with us, Odom says, these churches (including Cochran Chapel United Methodist, where St. Paul has been holding Sunday services during the 15 months of construction) have worked to realize St. Paul's vision of being the "soul and conscience of the Arts District."

PASTOR ODOM'S CONCEPTION OF ST. PAUL PLACES HEAVYWEIGHT expectations on his small church. With Fellowship, First Baptist, First United Methodist, and the Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe churches also ringing the area, St. Paul is not the only place to be moved religiously in the Arts District. But none of those

churches shares St. Paul's connection to the area's history. In recent years, archaeologists from the University of Texas at Austin, including Jodi Skipper, who is at work on a dissertation about St. Paul and Freedman's Town, have identified artifacts on church property illustrating the Arts District's African-American historical legacy.

In 1873, when reverends H. Boliver and William Bush founded St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church, the congregation met in a brush arbor in Freedman's Town. Established near a slave cemetery

following the Civil War's close in 1865, Freedman's Town grew as African-American from rural areas arrived, attracted by work in and near the community laying tracks and conducting engines for the Houston & Texas Central and the Texas and Pacific railroad companies. The area was not an incorporated part of Dallas at the time, and blacks maintained the segregated area as an economic and political safe haven. When blacks crossed from this community into Dallas, they were frequently arrested for vagrancy.

St. Paul's first building existed on a portion of the church's current property. After the original structure burned down, a brick building was erected in the late 1880s. According to oral history, in 1901, based on designs by William Sidney Pittman, Dallas' first black architect and Booker T. Washington's son-in-law, St. Paul began constructing its current edifice. The effort took 26 years, as bricks were either purchased through fundraising programs or congregants individually collected loose bricks to complete sections of the church. The exterior bricks' mismatched colors remain as a mosaic memorial to the endurance and fortitude of St. Paul's past members.

Over the course of late 19th and early 20th century, the formerly white neighborhood of State-Thomas transitioned to

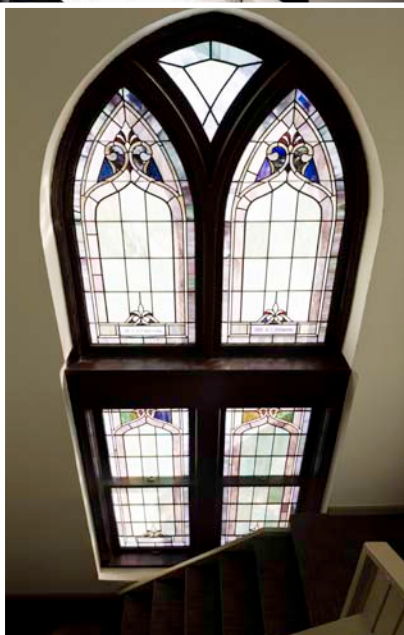
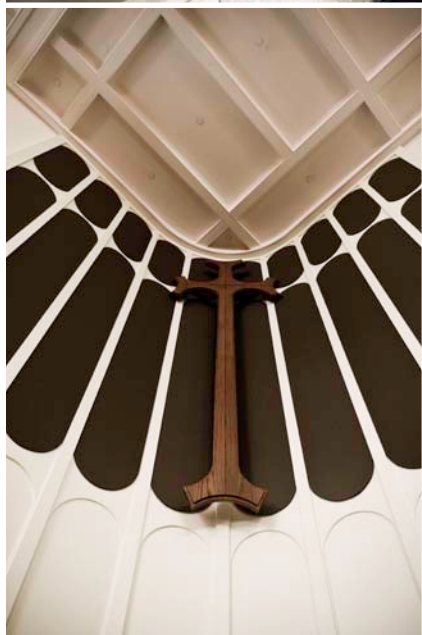
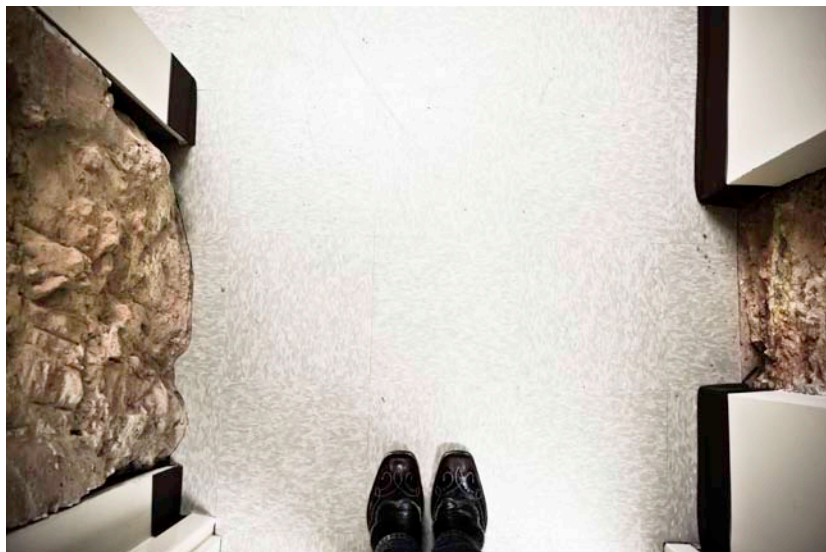


MIRACLE ON ROUTH STREET:

St. Paul stands in the shadow of One Arts Plaza. Odessa Bowie has been a member since 1954. Senior pastor Elzie Odom Jr. says his church is the soul of the Arts District.



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BORN AGAIN:

St. Paul's handmade pews (opposite page) were removed and refinished. Other original materials that made it through the extensive renovation include the century-old floorboards and the bricks congregants gathered to build the church. The bricks (this page, top) have been left exposed in the basement, where meals are served.

a predominately black one, as whites moved out to Dallas' many developing subdivisions and the segregated community expanded, as affluent black doctors, educators, and businessmen moved in. State-Thomas and Freedman's Town then boasted an economically mixed zone of affluent and working-class black families.

When St. Paul was completed, it stood as one of the most dominating institutions in Freedman's Town, a cultural and religious center. And throughout the first half of the 20th century, the church and the enclave grew and prospered in tandem. At its height, with the indefatigable I.B. Loud (senior pastor from 1948 to 1980) shepherding the congregation, St. Paul had 1,600 members.

However, during the late 1950s and 1960s, as Dallas grew, Freedman's Town began a decline. Houses were razed for Woodall Rodgers Freeway and Central Expressway, and blacks could move (though not without friction) into new neighborhoods in and around Dallas. Over the last 40 years, St. Paul has remained intact as its membership diminished greatly, as the neighborhood disappeared, and, now, as the revitalized district has overshadowed it.

AFTER 15 MONTHS AWAY FROM ST. PAUL'S sanctuary, congregants will worship there again in a tastefully renovated and elegantly preserved building with new interior safety sprinklers and air-conditioning systems, refinished original handmade pews, and refurbished century-old floorboards. As Pastor Odom leads a tour of the church, pointing out the artistry of original design choices revealed during the rehabilitation, he remarks that St. Paul, though a church and not a museum, will become a destination for visitors to the arts campus. While the other institutions are dominated by European high culture, he says, St. Paul offers unique access to black experiences in jazz, blues, and gospel music. "We bring that to the table," Odom says. "We are the conduit to the authentically African-American art forms."

First, though, St. Paul needs to be a destination for its own members. On Father's Day after Sunday service at Cochran Chapel, dressed in a sky-blue dress and matching hat, Odessa Bowie, a St. Paul member since 1954, beamed when she discussed her return to her home church. At 96, Bowie is one of St. Paul's oldest members, but she giggles girlishly and says, "I can't hardly wait to see it." **D**

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