

Proposed  
PEOPLE'S COMMUNITY CHURCH  
Historic District



Final Report

Detroit City Council  
HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD  
204 Coleman A. Young Municipal Center  
Detroit, MI 48226



By a resolution dated June 23, 2004, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed People's Community Church Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed People's Community Church Historic District is located at 8601 Woodward Avenue, on the west side of the street approximately 3 3/4 miles north of Jefferson Avenue and about six-tenths of a mile north of Grand Boulevard. The district contains one contributing resource, a church building of 1909. The built environment of Woodward Avenue is extremely varied in the area around the church, reflecting over a century of development and redevelopment along a major thoroughfare. The area is rich in church buildings of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is one of the segments of Woodward Avenue once called "Piety Hill."

People's Community Church is listed in the National Register of Historic Places (under the title First Baptist Church of Detroit) as part of a Thematic Resource nomination, "Religious Structures of Woodward Avenue."

**BOUNDARIES:** The boundaries of the proposed People's Community Church Historic District include the plot on which the structure is located and portions of the public rights-of-way adjacent. The boundaries are:

On the east, the centerline of Woodward Avenue.

On the south, the centerline of Pingree Avenue.

On the west, the centerline of the north-south alley lying between Woodward Avenue and Second Boulevard.

On the north, the northern boundary of Lot 1 of Anderson & McRay's Subdivision, (L. 13 P 91 Plats, WCR)

## HISTORY:

**North Baptist Church:** Detroit's North Baptist Church was founded in 1884 as a mission of First Baptist Church. In 1889, the congregation dedicated a brick church in Romanesque style located on Grand Boulevard near Woodward Avenue. By the early twentieth century, North Baptist Church was outgrowing its church and the area north of the boulevard on either side of Woodward was developing at a rapid rate. The congregation purchased property at the northwest corner of Woodward and Pingree, and on June 13, 1908, laid the cornerstone



for a new church. Dedication of the new church likely took place in May or June, 1910; two different dates were published in the press as having been scheduled, but no record of the actual event has yet been located. A little over two years after the dedication of its handsome new church, North Baptist merged with its mother congregation First Baptist and ceased to exist.

**First Baptist Church:** One of Detroit's earliest Protestant congregations, the First Baptist Church of Detroit was founded on October 20, 1827 under the

leadership of Reverend Henry Davis. Early meetings were held in the old University Building located on Bates Street. According to the "Detroit Gazette" of July 3<sup>rd</sup> that year, the trustees of the university had approved the Baptist Society using the building basement for six months. In April, 1828 Rev. Davis resigned due to failing health. On June 10<sup>th</sup> of that same year the city donated to the society the lot on the northwest corner of Fort and Griswold Streets. A frame building was erected there in 1831 and remained in use until replaced by a spacious brick meeting house which was dedicated on January 11, 1835. Additions to that structure were made in 1859 and 1863. In 1871 First Baptist Church sold the property on Fort and purchased several lots at Cass Avenue and Bagg Street (now Fisher Freeway). A brick chapel was erected at the site; and a year later, on April 25, 1875, a new church was dedicated. The main auditorium had 122 pews and a seating capacity of 700 and cost \$50,000 to build. First Baptist Church remained at that location until 1912.

A special business meeting was held October 16, 1912 to merge First Baptist Church of Detroit with its daughter congregation, North Baptist Church. First Baptist sold the building at Bagg and Cass and moved to the North Baptist structure on Woodward Avenue at Pingree. The consolidated churches took the name of the First Baptist Church and all properties owned by North Baptist were transferred to First Baptist Church. The ministers of both churches along with board members and trustees of each congregation resigned and

new ones were installed. The reorganized First Baptist Church of Detroit boasted a membership of 750. In 1957, faced with dwindling membership and the movement of its members away from the neighborhood, the congregation sold the building and moved to a new structure in Southfield, Michigan, which was dedicated in June 1965.

**People's Community Church:** People's Community Church was established May 24, 1954 as a result of an amicable separation from Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church by one of its ministers and several church members. Calling themselves the "Pathfinders," twenty-one spiritual-minded individuals met in a private home to form their own church. Within a month membership had reached three hundred, at which time People's Community secured the services of its first minister, the Rev. C. F. Stewart.

Initially the congregation held services at the A.C. Memorial Baptist Church located on Joy Road near Clairmount. Several months later the membership reached six hundred, making it necessary for the congregation to seek larger quarters. In October, 1954 Reverend Stewart and the membership rented the building on the northwest corner of 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Marquette from the Rev. T.S. Boone, Pastor of King Solomon Baptist Church. Resolving that the next move would be permanent and into the church of their dreams, a "Building Fund Drive" was established. By March 1955, the membership had amassed \$85,000, sufficient to serve as a down payment. In 1957, People's Community Church bought the First Baptist Church building at Woodward and Pingree as a permanent home.

People's Community Church continued to grow and progress, using as their motto "a tithing, loving, serving, praying, singing and teaching church." In addition to the regular organizations and programs of the church, special activities were designed for the benefit of its members. They included a Radio Ministry (WCHB), People's Community Church Credit Union, a Department of Christian Education, a licensed full time Day Care Nursery School, a newspaper (The Spokesman) and a Bowling League. Eight years later on April 5, 1965 the final payment on the church property was made, giving title to the members of People's Community Church. The Mortgage Burning Ceremonies were held three months later on July 11, 1965.

On November 3, 1966 the Rev. Carlyle F. Stewart, first pastor of People's Community Church, died. In his memory, chimes were purchased by the congregation and installed in the belfry. The chimes were designed to play daily at noon and 6:00 pm, and on Sunday at 12:15 P.M. Rev. Darneau V. Stewart, the nephew of the late Rev. C. F. Stewart, was installed as the Senior Pastor of People's Community Church on January 1, 1967. Under his leadership the church continued to progress and expand. The church purchased additional properties, which included 50, 60, and 70 Pingree; 81 Blaine and a church parsonage in the University District. The commercial building located next to the church at 8627 Woodward Avenue was purchased in October 1969. It was completely renovated with facilities for offices, classrooms and social activities for use by the community and church members. This

facility was dedicated on December 5, 1971 and eight years later a mortgage burning service was held for the Activity Building (not included in the historic district). Rev. D. V. Stewart died December 10, 1981 after collapsing in the pulpit four days earlier.

#### Randall Memorial Church



By an overwhelming vote of the congregation, Rev. Dr. Martin E. Bolton was elected and installed as Senior Pastor of People's Community Church on October 31, 1982. Beginning with the \$75,000 renovation of the Möller pipe organ Rev. Bolton oversaw several major improvement projects, including the installation of a new elevator which made the church handicap accessible. Rev. Bolton also

continues the tradition of outreach into the community. The church began an on-site feeding program for the poor to augment delivery of Focus Hope boxed meals for senior citizens and in January, 1990 the church opened its doors to the city's homeless; providing food, shelter, blankets, sanitary kits and clothing for the city's poor. The congregation of People's Community Church has continued to prosper, investment in their church properties reflecting their pride in the beautiful building they occupy.

#### Memorial Evangelical, Buffalo, NY



**John H. Coxhead:** The architect chosen to design the North Baptist Church was John H. Coxhead, born in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in 1863 and educated in the New York area. He studied architecture at Cooper Union and later attended Columbia for a year. In the mid-1880s, Coxhead worked for architects in such diverse states as Massachusetts, Illinois, South Dakota and New York. In 1886, he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota and established his own practice a year later. After a successful career in St.

Paul and a brief return to South Dakota, he moved to Buffalo, New York in 1892 and went into partnership with W. W. Carlin; by the end of 1893, he was again in business on his own. In 1894 he designed the Delaware Avenue Methodist Church in Buffalo, a handsome twin-towered structure in a somewhat attenuated Richardsonian Romanesque style.

In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Coxhead designed a series of churches in the "modern Gothic" manner; these are characterized by the massing of large elements dominated by large openings, and often are built of rough-faced materials. Two Buffalo examples predate the People's Community Church. The earliest, Randall Memorial Baptist of 1903 (demolished), displays these characteristics very nicely. Memorial Evangelical Church of 1906 is of yellow brick, but does display the characteristics of Coxhead's manner of the time in the massing of large volumes and the use of large openings. Coxhead's work in the style seems to have reached an apogee in Buffalo's Riverside Methodist of 1912, a church whose strong resemblance to the earlier Detroit building is obvious.

Commissions slowed during the First World War and Coxhead responded by going to work for the War Department. Although the agency changed from time to time, he remained in federal employment and designed several Veterans' Hospitals. He retired in 1934 at the age of 71, and by the time of his death in 1943 was said to be the oldest living member of the American Institute of Architects.

**DESCRIPTION:** A design for North Baptist Church published in the Detroit "News Tribune" on October 27, 1907 is substantially the same as the church as built in massing but differs in detail. The style was called "modern Gothic;" as one might expect, the design shows strong influences from the Arts and Crafts movement and the Prairie style. Massing completely at variance with anything known in the medieval period reflects the need to design spaces for a form of worship unknown in Gothic times.

The church is built of random ashlar limestone with wood window frames (some now replaced in metal). The original roof is presumed to have been slate; the building is now covered in asphalt shingles. The design takes into account the corner location, with the massive tower providing a transition between the sanctuary portion of the building to the north facing Woodward and the chapel and Sunday School/meeting room wing to the south facing Pingree.

The tower houses the main entrance to the building, its first floor providing a spacious vestibule which connects to the main sanctuary as well as the south wing. The large Tudor-arched doorway retains its stained glass sidelights and transom, but the doors are now glazed aluminum. Three small rectangular windows mark the second floor. At the top of the second floor, a series of horizontal stone courses mark a recessing of the stone walls; the third stage of the tower contains only two very small windows on each side, divided by a central stone buttress that springs from the horizontal courses below and rises through two stories. The bell space is marked by two very large louvered Tudor-arched openings. Above the bell openings, a projecting string course is placed at the bottom of a parapet which is divided into two panels on each side. The tower somewhat unusually culminates in a low-pitched hip roof, once surmounted by a central cross.



Riverside Methodist, Buffalo, NY

North of the tower, the gabled main bay of the facade has a single large window more-or-less in Perpendicular style. At the northern corner, a modern link structure connects the church building to a modern activities building, which is not included in the proposed historic district.

To the south, the front facade has three Tudor-arched windows on the first floor and three

rectangular windows aligned above, expressing the office/meeting room character of the spaces within. Vertically aligned basement windows are mostly hidden by shrubbery. The facade facing Pingree is divided into three bays, that in the center being a smaller version of the main bay facing Woodward, with a large central window under a gable. That bay is flanked on both sides by office/meeting spaces expressed by vertically aligned windows at basement, first floor, and second floor levels, the flanking bays having flat roofs. A secondary entrance is on the first floor of the western bay; at the rear of that bay an elevator tower has recently been built to provide handicapped access.

The main sanctuary lies in the northern portion of the building. It is an imposing two-story space with a nearly circular gallery running around the perimeter. The domical ceiling of the main space has a stained glass skylight centered above, lit by a skylight in the roof; this is the only source of direct outside light in the sanctuary. At the eastern side, a barrel vault intersects the domical ceiling in an unusual geometric configuration. To the west, the first floor has a platform containing altar, pulpit, and other church furniture; a recess behind contains the baptismal pool. Above, in the gallery, a large flat of gold-painted organ pipes screens the open divisions of a pipe organ placed in a recess; further organ chambers open into the sides of the recess. The organ is believed to be original and by M. P. Möller of Hagerstown, Maryland. On all other sides, the sanctuary observes the popular "Akron Plan" of the time, with Sunday School and meeting rooms which can be opened into the main sanctuary with folding doors or counter weighted sash. Much of the Gothic/Craftsman style oak woodwork of the sanctuary is now painted white, but older photographs show that it was originally varnished. New pews upholstered in red have replaced the originals.

In accord with the Akron Plan, flanking the sanctuary on three sides are subsidiary spaces which can be opened to the sanctuary. Most important is the chapel to the south, a two-story balconied space now partially subdivided to create offices and circulation hallways. The large south-facing window, divided horizontally by the balcony, once lit this space but now lies hidden behind subdivided rooms. To the east of the sanctuary, on both first and second floor levels, are large and handsome meeting rooms with brick and terra-cotta fireplaces at their southern ends. The large eastern facing window is visible from the sanctuary through these rooms. Likewise, a large north-facing window, not visible from the street, can be seen through the glazing of the rather small spaces which flank the sanctuary on that side. Behind the sanctuary to the west are offices and, on the second floor, a large choir room. A stairwell occupies the southwestern corner of the building, connecting all levels with the south-facing entrance at ground level. The recent elevator tower connects to that stairwell at all levels.

**CRITERIA:** The proposed historic district meets National Register criteria C: [Resources] that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction. The board also believes that the criteria consideration a is met: "A religious property deriving primary significance from architectural or artistic distinction or historical importance."

**Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board:** The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Russell L. Baltimore, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, De Witt Dykes, Edward Francis, Lucile Cruz Gajec, Marie M. Gardner, Calvin Jackson and Harriet Johnson. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staffs, are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed historic district. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.



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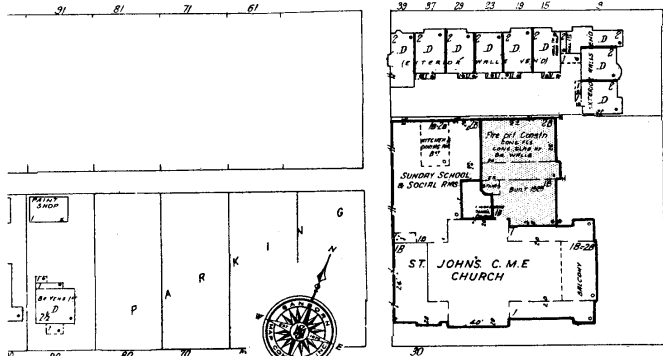
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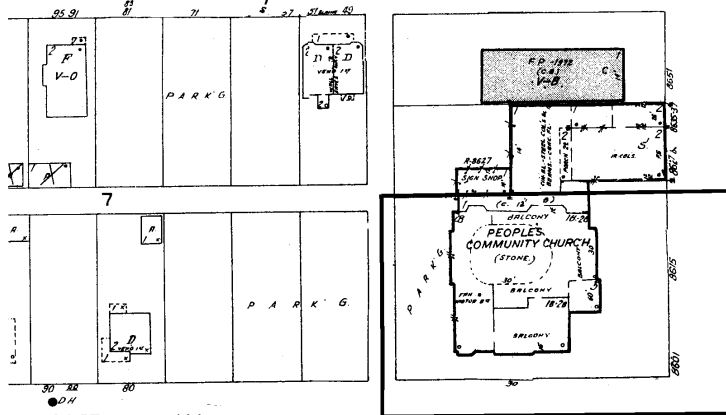
# Proposed People's Community Church Historic District

Boundaries shown in heavy black lines.

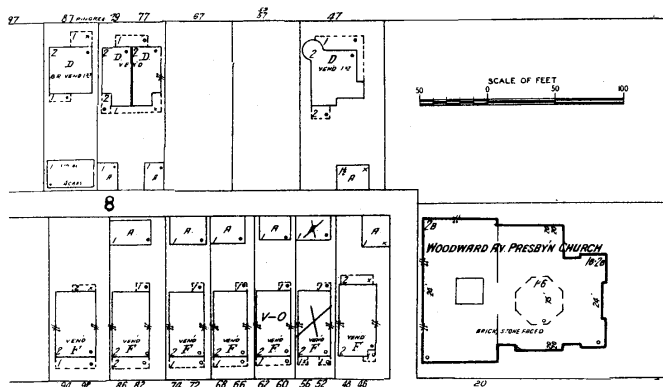
GLADSTONE AV.



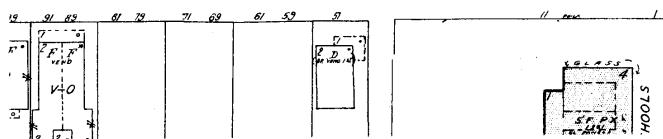
BLAINE AV.



PINGREE AV.



PHILADELPHIA AV.



WOODWARD AV.

