Preliminary Summary of Information

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in December 2022

Greater Union Baptist Church
1956 W. Warren Boulevard

CITY OF CHICAGO
Lori E. Lightfoot, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Maurice D. Cox, Commissioner

Cover Illustrations:

Lower left: the men's chorus of Greater Union Baptist Church gathered in the auditorium around 1930, a few years after the congregation purchased the building.

Lower right: an Easter gathering at Greater Union recorded on film Sunday, April 8, 1945. (Credit: congregation member Freddie Bogan)

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

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Greater Union Baptist Church

(Originally Church of the Redeemer, Second Universalist)

1956 W. Warren Boulevard

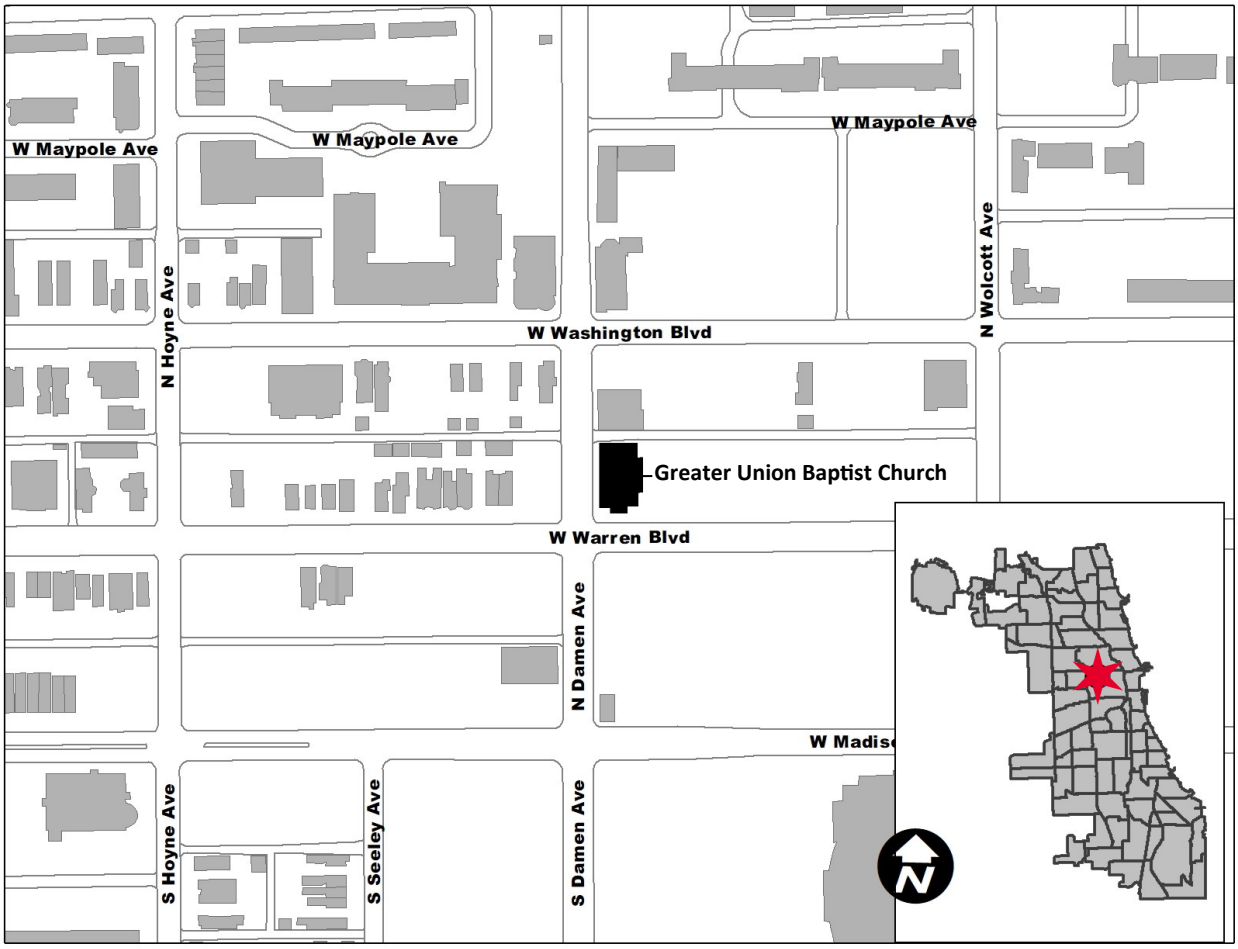
Constructed: 1886

Architect: William Le Baron Jenney

Greater Union Baptist Church is a massively scaled and well proportioned brick church with distinct terra cotta details occupying a prominent position at the intersection of W. Warren Boulevard and an N. Damen Avenue on the Near West Side. It is one of three surviving churches designed by William Le Baron Jenney, an architect of national significance. While an excellent example of the Romanesque Revival style of architecture, the design also reflects Jenney's design philosophy through its strong massing, monochromy, restrained ornament and functional interior plan.

Aside from its architecture, Greater Union Baptist Church exemplifies the important role that religious institutions played in the development and sustenance of Chicago's neighborhoods. It was built in 1886 by a Universalist congregation named Church of the Redeemer. In addition to worship services, the Church of the Redeemer hosted events and lectures that reflected Progressive Era concerns, including establishing a series of weekly lectures known as the West Side People's Forum, part of a national campaign known as the Open Forum Movement which created places for people to discuss real world problems and possible solutions.

In 1928, the building was bought by an established Black Baptist congregation and rechristened as the Greater Union Baptist which has maintained the building as a place for worship and vital community sustenance for nearly a century. Special thanks go to Preservation Chicago and current and former members of the congregation Adrienne Thompson, John Spence, Carolyn Turner, Barbara Theus, Annabelle and Andrea Bowdry, Freddie Bogan, Maudine Wordlaw, Patricia Hicks, Darryl Williams, Deacon Fred McKinney, and Darcea Gamble who testified about their experience of Greater Union Baptist Church as living heritage where fellowship, music, food, generations of families and architecture blend. Transcriptions of these valuable personal histories and experiences are included in this report.



Greater Union Baptist Church is located on Chicago's Near West Side at the highly visible intersection of W. Warren Boulevard and N. Damen Avenue.

Building Design and Construction

While the building has been home to Greater Union Baptist Church for nearly a century, the structure was originally built the Church of the Redeemer in 1886. The Church of the Redeemer was founded on May 19, 1858, as the Second Universalist congregation in Chicago. The fledgling congregation began to meet in the West Market Hall, a municipal food market which stood in the Randolph Street wholesale market near Halsted Street. The first pastor was Rev. Alfred Constantine Barry.

Though it was a young congregation at the start of the Civil War in 1861, the conflict cast into sharp relief the Church of the Redeemer's opposition to slavery. Founding pastor Rev. Barry served in the Union Army as a military chaplain. Forty men of the congregation joined the Union Army together under the lieutenancy of J. H. Swan, the leader of the Sunday School at Redeemer. Drills were performed in the Sunday School room and the volunteers were sent off by the congregation with a special ceremony. An 1886 history of the congregation published in *The Universalist* newspaper documented that "afterward many of these volunteers were brought

home dead from the battlefield."

Soon after the end of the war, the Church of the Redeemer built its first church in 1866, a frame structure at Sangamon and Washington Streets under the leadership of Rev. J. H. Tuttle. The congregation worshipped here for nearly two decades under the leadership of seven pastors. By 1885 the congregation numbered 400 and had outgrown its first church. Rev. Charles Conklin, led the construction of the current building, which replaced the congregation's first church which at the time *The Inter Ocean* newspaper described as a "large, ugly, wooden structure which is somewhat dilapidated."

The lot on which the church stands was donated by Mrs. Mary H. Talcott, widow of prominent businessman, abolitionist and politician Mancel Talcott. Both were long-time members and financial supporters of the Church of the Redeemer. The congregation chose prominent Chicago architect William Le Baron Jenney to design their new church at a cost of $40,000.

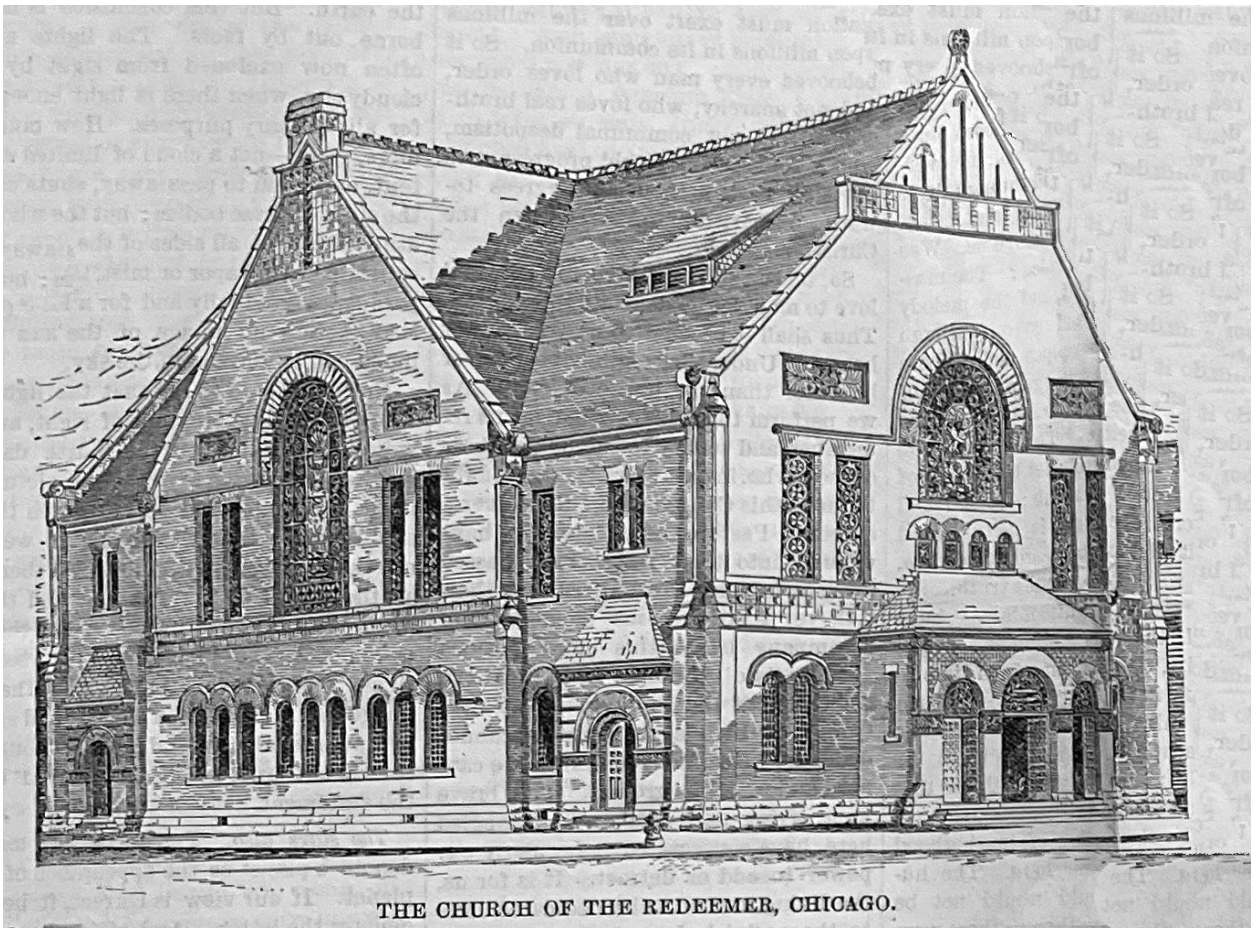
The builder was Alexander Anderson, a Scottish immigrant who came to the United States in 1870 at the age of 29 and to Chicago in 1871 after the Great Fire. Prominent buildings he constructed in Chicago include the Church of the Ascension (1887, 1133 N La Salle Drive), the First Regiment Armory (1890, demolished 1968, 1552 South Michigan Avenue) and the Third Presbyterian Church (1878, northwest corner of Ogden and Ashland Avenues, demolished circa 1950).

Before construction was complete, the congregation at the Church of the Redeemer began gathering for worship in the first floor of the still-unfinished building in February 1886. On Easter Sunday 1886, the Church of the Redeemer was dedicated by its 600-member congregation.

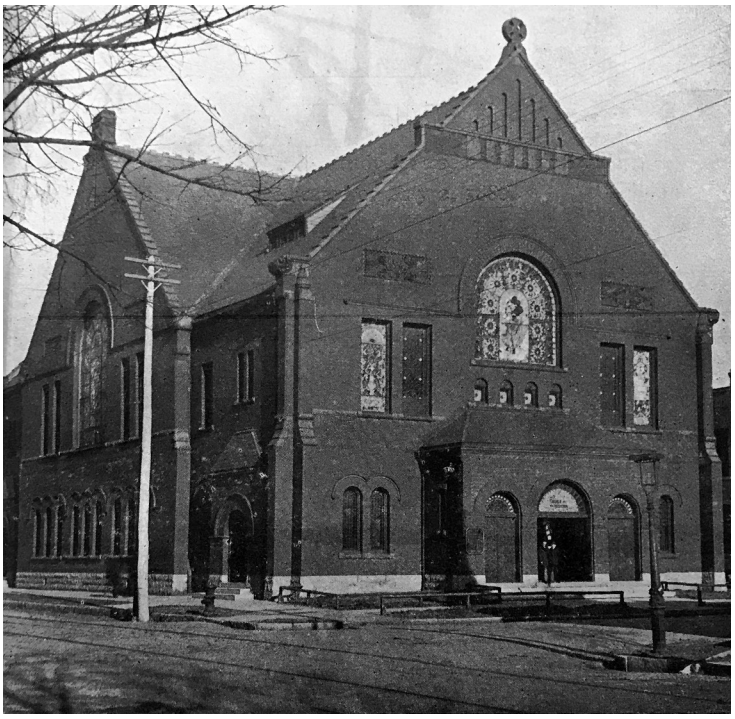
The brick church occupies a prominent position at the northwest corner of W. Warren Boulevard and N. Damen Avenue, both heavily travelled streets. The main facade faces south onto Warren, while the west elevation faces Damen. These street-facing elevations are dark-red pressed brick with unglazed terra cotta ornament, brown sandstone trim all set in dark red mortar. These materials lend the façade an almost monochrome effect which reflects Jenney's emphasis on leaving building materials in their natural color. The less visible north elevation, facing an alley, and east elevation, facing a parking lot, are simply treated with common brick.

The two-story building has a rectangular plan measuring 70 feet across its south elevation and extending 115 feet on its sides. The structure consists of 20-inch-thick load-bearing brick walls set on a quarry-faced limestone foundation with wood-frame floor plates and a wood-truss roof structure. The overall form of the building consists of four transepts extending from a cross-gabled roof which was originally slated and now sheathed with shingles. A single, massive gable dominates each elevation, reflecting William Le Baron Jenney's preference for singular, large forms rather than multiples of smaller ones.

The front facade facing Warren Boulevard is topped with a gable relieved with restrained deco-



(Credit: *The Universalist* newspaper, May 15, 1886. Harvard Divinity School Library)



(Credit: Church of the Redeemer. *The Church Tidings.* Chicago, 1901).

An 1886 rendering (above) and early photograph (left) of the Church of the Redeemer, now Greater Union Baptist, show that the building has undergone very few alterations since it was built.

The front facade facing Warren Boulevard features a projecting entrance portico and a single large gable.

The west elevation facing Damen with an arcade of round-arched windows at the first floor and a cross-gabled roofline.

A selection of details from the building executed in unglazed terra cotta that are incorporated into the exterior wall structure.

rative panels in unglazed terracotta. The gable features a large arched window with terra cotta voussoirs flanked by flat arched windows. All of the windows are stained glass. The corners of this elevation are braced with engaged buttresses that express the stability of the structure. At sidewalk level, a one-story bay projects from the center of the façade forming a portico with entrances set in round-arched openings. These arches–and the brick arches throughout the building–are constructed of gauged brick, a high-quality method of arch construction that employs wedge-shaped bricks with consistent mortar joints radiating to the arch's center point.

The top of the portico and a horizontal band between the first and second floors are decorated with a pattern of small, repeated geometrical motifs set adjacent to one another, a type of decoration known as a diaper. Jenney favored this type of decoration which was used to decorate stone surfaces in medieval architecture and illuminated manuscripts. This diaper ornament, like all of the ornament at the building, is not applied to the building, but structurally part of the wall, a distinctive feature of Jenney's design philosophy.

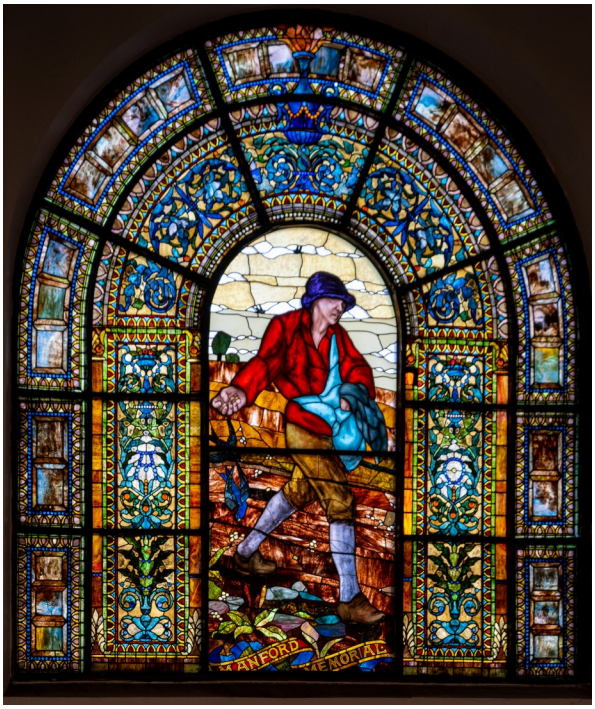
The longer Warren Boulevard façade is treated similarly as the front, though here the gable projects slightly and is flanked on each side by a projecting portico with single entrances. An arcade of round-arched windows marches along the first floor.

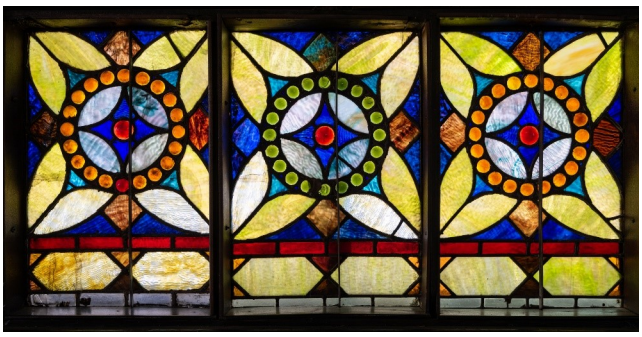
On the interior, the first floor of the church contains a large space originally designed as a Sunday School and social rooms with smaller side rooms for a vestry, parlor and pastor's office. The auditorium, or main worship space is located on the second floor. Curved pews arranged on a sloped floor face the raised chancel reserved for the choir, pulpit, Baptistry and organ pipes. The column-free soaring worship space features massive hammerbeam trusses built up of laminated timbers, another trademark of the building's architect. The trusses are ornamented with large wood pendants. Varnished Southern pine boards finish the ceiling. Three bronze chandeliers, originally fitted with gas, illuminate the auditorium. The walls of the auditorium are painted plaster.

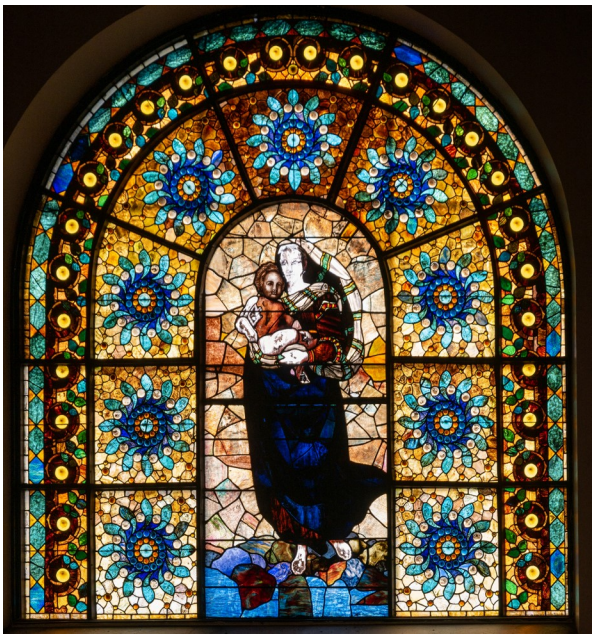
The interior of the auditorium features richly colored allegorical stained-glass windows in three of the transepts. They were donated by members of the original congregation as memorials to loved ones. In the north transept stands *The Sower,* an homage to an 1850 painting by Jean-François Millet. The window depicts a peasant farmer on a hillside sowing winter wheat and is a allegory of the Parable of the Sower found in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus compared his message to seed and the sower as Christian followers who spread the teachings. The window was donated by Mrs. H. B. Manford and her daughter, Mrs. Norman Bridge, in memory of Mr. H. B. Manford, a supporter of the Church of the Redeemer and publisher of *Manford's Magazine*, an influential monthly of the Universalist denomination.

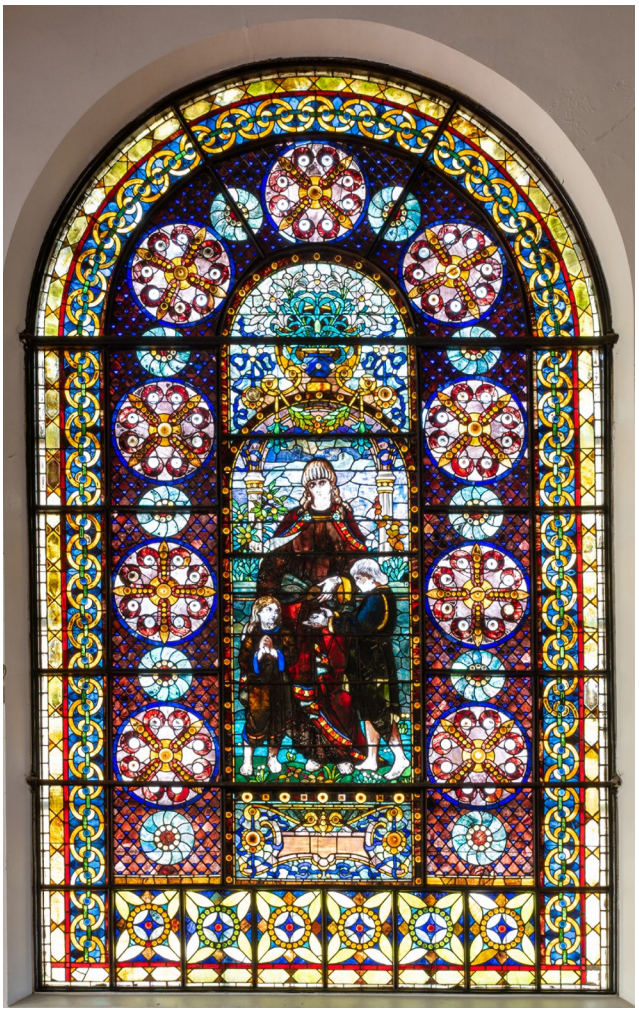
The stained-glass window in the west transept depicts the virtue *Charity*, represented as a mother feeding her children. It was donated by friends of Mancel Talcott (1817-1878), who was a member and generous financial supporter of the Church of the Redeemer when it was in its pre-

The capacious, bright and column-free interior of the worship space is supported by exposed hammer-beam trusses built up of laminated lumber. The ceiling is Southern pine with an oil finish.









Large and richly colored stained-glass windows are located on three sides the of the auditorium. They were designed by McCully & Miles, a decoration and stained glass studio based in Chicago.

Top left: *The Sower* is based on an 1850 painting by Jean-François Millet, and represents a New Testament parable.

Bottom left: *The Madonna* window represents Raphael's 1514 oil painting known as the *Sistine Madonna.*

Bottom right: the west transept window depicts the virtue *Charity*, represented as a mother feeding her children. It was donated by friends of Mancel Talcott (1817-1878), an early settler of Chicago, friend of the Church of the Redeemer and abolitionist.

vious location at Washington and Sangamon Streets, and his widow donated the land for the present building. Mancel Talcott was an early settler of Chicago and became prominent in banking and politics, serving on the City Council of Chicago as a Republican and Abolitionist.

The Higgins Memorial window is found in the south transept. The image is based on Raphael's 1514 oil painting known as the *Sistine Madonna* which depicts the Madonna holding the child Christ. It was donated by a Mr. and Mrs. Higgins in memory of their son, Willie J. Higgins.

While none of these windows at Greater Union are signed by their creators, the May 15, 1886, edition of *The Universalist*, a denominational newspaper reported that the windows are "of superior quality and workmanship" and "were designed and constructed by McCully & Miles, of Chicago." McCully & Miles was a stained glass and interior decoration studio founded in Chicago as early as 1876 and they were one of several active firms in the city producing mostly unsigned windows for private homes and sacred spaces, including one window in the highly significant glass ensemble at Second Presbyterian Church in Chicago. McCully & Miles also exhibited stained glass in the 1893 Columbian World's Exhibition where it received an award.

Romanesque Revival Architecture in Chicago

The Greater Union Baptist broadly reflects the Romanesque Revival style with particular refinements that reflect William Le Baron Jenney's personal design philosophy as iterated in his *Principles and Practice of Architecture* published in 1869. The Romanesque Revival pervaded Chicago architecture during the late 1880s and 1890s. It was derived from medieval European architecture, primarily churches, built in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and is characterized by visually massive masonry walls, round-arched entrances and windows, and ornament based on medieval precedents and geometric ornament. Greater Union exhibits all of these features.

Jenney's refinements of the Romanesque at Greater Union include the building's emphasis of massive forms and large proportions. The design also emphasizes stability and strength of the exterior wall through the deeply set window openings and narrow mortar joints. And finally, while the Romanesque embraced architectural ornament, at Greater Union we see that Jenney tried to incorporate ornament into the wall rather than apply it to the wall. All of the ornament at Greater Union is therefore structural.

The use of the Romanesque Revival style by American architects was part of a widespread appreciation of historic architectural styles that dominated architectural design in the United States throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the earliest significant American examples of the style is the original building of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., began in 1847 to designs by architect James Renwick, Jr. However, it was not until the 1880s, with the rise to prominence of architect Henry H. Richardson, that the Romanesque Revival became a widespread architectural style.

Beginning in the early 1870s with Boston's Trinity Church and continuing until his death in 1885, Richardson developed a personal architectural style that utilized the visual characteristics of medieval Romanesque buildings in a simplified, strongly geometric manner that he considered suitable for modern building types, including libraries, government buildings, and schools. Richardson designed several prominent buildings in Chicago in the new style in the 1880s, including the John J. Glessner House at 1800 S. Prairie Avenue (a designated Chicago Landmark) and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store at Adams and Wells (demolished).

Architect William Le Baron Jenney

Greater Union Baptist Church, originally the Church of the Redeemer, was designed by William Le Baron Jenney. He was 54 and at the height of his creative power as an architect, designing the church nearly concurrently as the Home Insurance Building, the first steel-framed skyscraper. Jenney was a nineteenth century Chicago architect recognized internationally as the father of the metal frame skyscraper and also is regarded as a founding thinker of the Chicago School of commercial architecture.

Born in 1832 and dying in 1907, Jenney's life almost exactly spanned the Victorian age. He was born in Fairhaven, Massachusetts in 1832 into a family which belonged to the local mercantile aristocracy due to their owning and operating a thriving fleet of whaling ships. He received his secondary education at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and in 1850 he entered the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University. Before this, however, Jenney had spent the years 1846-49 on an extended sea voyage traveling to Chile, California, Hawaii and the Philippines. It was in the latter islands that the indigenous method of light bamboo construction for strong and storm-resistant homes made an indelible impression on Jenney and would later lead to his early enthusiasm for skeleton framed structures rather than traditional masonry bearing-wall structures. Another early and profound influence on Jenney was simply the built environment of his New England background. The clipper ship, the textile mill, and the truss bridge all embodied a functionalist practicality that Jenney would later adopt and develop as one of the governing principles of his own architecture.

Disenchanted by the inadequacies of the engineering course at Harvard, Jenney decided to continue his education abroad. Although England was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, it was in France that the best civil engineering education was to be obtained. The profession of civil engineer had its origins in the military engineer, and a system of technical training had been developed there during the eighteenth century. The most famous school was the *École Polytechnique* in Paris. However, this was closed to Jenney as it was largely restricted to French citizens destined for either the civil or military service. Accordingly, in 1853, Jenney enrolled in the equally well-regarded *École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures* whose illustrious graduates includes Gustave Eiffel. Jenney himself graduated with honors in 1856. The curriculum, which

William Le Baron Jenney (1832-1907) designed the Church of the Redeemer, now Greater Union Baptist. At the time he had recently completed his design of the Home Insurance Building which established his national status. (Credit: Ryerson & Burnham Archives Archival Image Collection)

The Home Insurance Building at S. LaSalle and W. Adams Streets in Chicago is regarded as the world's first skyscraper due to its height and skeletal structural frame. It was completed in 1885 and demolished in 1931 to make way for the Field Building, a designated Chicago Landmark. (Credit: Ryerson & Burnham Archives Archival Image Collection)

was predominantly a practical and applied engineering program, did include courses in architectural and landscape design. The program at the *École Centrale*, which treated structure and design as interrelated, would have obvious repercussions in Jenney's later career.

This European educational experience was crucial to Jenney. He absorbed a philosophy which first of all advocated economy, simplicity, and structural awareness and theorized that aesthetic beauty would naturally result once practical considerations were rationally satisfied. More importantly, Jenney learned a working methodology to implement and realize this outlook.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Jenney enlisted in the Union Army (as did members of the Church of the Redeemer). Jenney served as Captain Aide de Camp at Cairo, Illinois, and then joined the Engineer's Staff of Generals Grant and Sherman as Major-General. In that capacity he designed fortifications at Corinth, Shiloh and Vicksburg, where Jenney met the future landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted.

After the war, Jenney came to Chicago and in 1868 opened an architectural practice. That year he partnered with notable landscape designers Olmstead and Vaux in planning Riverside, Illinois, the nation's first planned "railroad suburb" where Jenney also designed several residential buildings and a hotel. Another important early commission came in 1870 when he was appointed Architect & Engineer by the West Chicago Park Commissioners. In this capacity he was instrumental in planning three major parks in Chicago—Douglas, Humboldt, Garfield (originally named Central Park) of the West Parks system and their connecting landscaped boulevards. Except for a brief intermission in 1876 when he taught architecture at the University of Michigan, Jenney devoted his entire career to his architectural practice, adding William Mundie as a partner in 1891 and Elmer Jensen in 1905. He retired to Los Angeles in 1905 and died in that city two years later.

While Jenney designed residential, public, collegiate structures and religious buildings like Greater Union Baptist Church, it is for his commercial buildings that he is remembered and lauded. Most of these were built in Chicago after the Great Fire, when Jenney became a leading architect in the rebuilding of Chicago's central business district in the 1880s and 1890s. Four of these survive: the Second Leiter Building, (1891) 403 S. State Street; the Ludington Building, (1891) 1104 S. Wabash Avenue; the Manhattan Building, (1891) 431 S. Dearborn Street, and the New York Life Building (1894, 1898 addition) 43 S. LaSalle Street. These four building are designated Chicago Landmarks.

His most famous building was demolished in 1931. It was the eleven-story Home Insurance Building of 1884-85 which stood at the northeast corner of Adams and LaSalle Streets. The notoriety of the Home Insurance Building stems from the fact that many regarded it as the first true skyscraper because of its almost complete reliance on steel framing for support, a truly revolutionary and innovative building technology. For generations scholars have hotly debated and discussed whether or not the Home Insurance Building truly deserves the accolade of first skyscraper. The final verdict is that this was an important and seminal step in an evolutionary process, but neither it nor indeed any building can really be certified as the absolutely first sky-

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(Credit: Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS IL -1022)

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(Credit: Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Archival Image Collection, "Architectural Reviewer," February 1897, p.115)

3

(Credit: Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS IL-1051)

A selection of commercial works by William Le Baron Jenney which are designated as Chicago Landmarks:

1. **Leiter II Building, 403 S. State St. (1891)**
2. **Ludington Building, 1104 S. Wabash Ave. (1891)**
3. **Manhattan Building, 431 S. Dearborn St. (1891)**
4. **New York Life Building under construction, 37-43 S. LaSalle St. (1893-94)**

Grace Episcopal Church, 1439 S. Wabash Avenue (1868, destroyed by fire 1915) (Credit: Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Archival Image Collection)

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Riverside, Illinois (1883) (Credit: https://www.flickr.com/photos/riversideillinois/)

Congregational Church in Manistee, Michigan (1892) (Credit: National Register of Historic Places)

While he is most well known for his commercial work, Jenney designed a wide range of building types including these three churches in addition to Church of the Redeemer, now Greater Union Baptist. Of these four, Greater Union Baptist is the most intact, Jenney-designed church.

scraper as a number of architects in both Chicago and New York were simultaneously involved in the evolution of metal frame construction between 1882 and 1889. Following the completion of the Home Insurance Building in 1886, Jenney's firm received numerous commissions for other early metal-framed structures.

Jenney's contribution to American architecture extended far beyond his practice. He wrote a number of important technical papers for *Inland Architect* magazine, and a series of his lectures on the history of architecture were published in that same journal. Most significant and impressive are the number of young architects whose later outstanding careers were launched by the training they received in Jenney's office. The list of names includes giants in the annals of architectural history, most significantly Louis H. Sullivan, William Holabird, Martin Roche, and Daniel Burnham.

Jenney is not known as an ecclesiastical architect, however the Church of the Redeemer, now Greater Union Baptist Church was one of four churches designed by Jenney. It is one of three that survive and it is the most intact of these three Jenney-designed churches. Early in his career in 1867 he designed the Grace Episcopal Church (1439 S. Wabash Avenue) which survived the Great Fire only to be destroyed by fire in 1915. The design was based on 13th century French Gothic, a style which Jenney was particularly fond of for its structural expression. In 1883 he designed Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Riverside, Illinois. Styled as an English country church with an exposed timber structure infilled with rubble stone, the building still stands though somewhat altered. His last church commission came in 1892 when he designed the Congregational Church in Manistee, Michigan which survives and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Like Greater Union, the design emphasizes form, color and taut wall surfaces over ornament.

Later History of the Church of the Redeemer

From its dedication 1886 until 1928, the building hosted the Church of the Redeemer, a Universalist congregation. In addition to worship services, the church hosted events and lectures that reflected Progressive Era concerns such as temperance, women's right-to-vote, and the welfare of children. In the 1910s, the congregation at the Church of the Redeemer raised funds for Wilberforce College in Ohio, the oldest historically black university. In 1911, the Church of the Redeemer reported that over the past five years it had aided 2,143 persons with fuel, food, rent, employment and legal aid.

The Church of the Redeemer embarked on a particularly active phase between 1914 and 1917 when it hosted a series of weekly lectures known as the West Side People's Forum, where each Sunday evening (except for summers) the church opened its doors to the public for a free lecture, preceded by a musical performance. Redeemer described the program as a "free platform for discussion of the problems of our common life" and the lectures were advertised in the

press.

The West Side People's Forum was part of a national movement known as the Open Forum Movement which centered on public lectures to create a more informed and democratic public. The Open Forum Movement originated at the People's Institute which was established by Charles Sprague-Smith at the Cooper Union in New York City in 1897. Another foundation of the movement began in 1908 at Ford Hall in Boston, under the leadership of George Coleman who later lectured at Redeemer.

The Open Forum Movement meant to provide a common meeting place for all classes to discuss real world problems and possible solutions. Though the movement often took root at churches like Redeemer that had large auditoriums, the lectures were secular. The movement was politically non-partisan, though progressive views were common, and the movement was unafraid of controversial speakers.

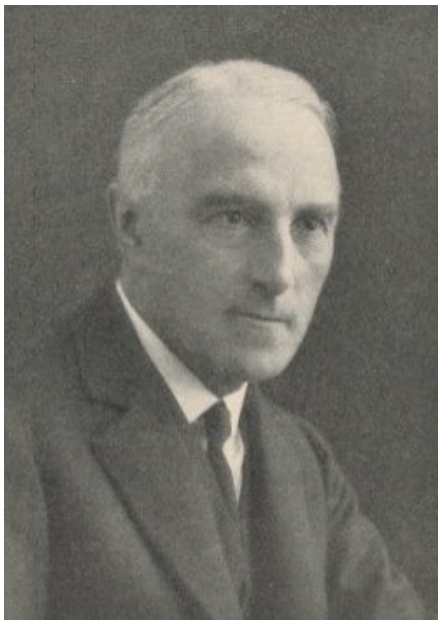
A distinctive feature of the open forum was that the attendees were expected to ask questions of the speaker, and advertisements for lectures of the West Side People's Forum included the aphorism "Questions From The Floor." The question period often ran longer than the lecture itself. Percy Stickney Grant who led a forum in New York wrote, "the invited speakers, under the grilling of an astute and well-read democracy, were taught never to make a statement which they could not back up."

The lectures at the West Side People's Forum ranged across social and cultural concerns and problems of the time. One of these was World War I, which was bleeding Europe white. As the war raged in 1916, the West Side People's Forum hosted at least six lectures on ways to end the conflict, including two members of the British Parliament as well as ethicist Stanton George Coit and journalist Samuel Kerkham Ratcliffe, both also from Britain. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Unitarian minister and uncle of Frank Lloyd Wright, also spoke about Henry Ford's expedition to Europe to negotiate an end to World War I.

While World War I is long in the past, some of the topics discussed at the West Side People's Forum remain relevant concerns today. Black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois spoke on "The World Problem of the Color Line" in February 1916. That same month Grace Abbott, director of the Immigrants' Protective League, spoke about protection of immigrants and helping them adjust to American life. In 1917 the forum hosted Black civil rights activist Mary Church Terrell who helped found the National Association of Colored Women, and who was a key activist in the suffrage movement.

Questions of wealth distribution in market capitalism and the possibilities offered by socialism were frequent topics at Redeemer's forum. A national leader in the Socialist Movement, Morris Hillquit, spoke on the difference between capital "S" Socialism and social reform. Catholic priest John Ryan of the Catholic University of America spoke on wealth distribution in America. Episcopalian Reverend Samuel S. Marquis spoke of the Ford Motor Company's profit-

African American civil right activist Mary Church Terrell spoke at the church in 1917. (Credit: women.ca.gov)



British M. P. Samuel Kerkham Ratcliffe lectured on peace in Europe after World War I. (Credit: nypl.digitalcollections)

Between 1914 and 1917, the Church of the Redeemer hosted a series of weekly lectures known as the West Side People's Forum which was part of a national initiative known as the Open Forum Movement which centered on public lectures to create a more informed and democratic public.

Social reformer Grace Abbott spoke about protection of immigrants and helping them adjust to American life. (Credit: americaslibrary.gov)

Black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois spoke on "The World Problem of the Color Line" in February 1916. (Credit: Library of Congress)

sharing plan for its employees.

More locally, the West Side People's Forum hosted speakers on Chicago's municipal concerns. Alderman Robert M. Buck presented a lecture entitled "The City Hall Battlefield." George Hooker of the Chicago City Club spoke on public transit improvements made in other cities that could be implemented in Chicago, so too did University of Chicago Professor Charles Zueblin who spoke on reforms to municipal governments throughout the country. Activist Harriet Elizabeth Vittum spoke on the Chicago Women's Municipal Platform which called for reforms of public schools, housing, policing and the city's public health programs.

After three robust seasons, The West Side People's Forum ended in 1917. Around this time, press coverage of the Church of the Redeemer also declined. Weekly announcements of Sunday services at the church disappeared from newspaper records around 1920. It is unknown if the congregation of the Church of the Redeemer reestablished itself in a new location.

A New Chapter: The Greater Union Baptist Church Congregation

In 1928, the Illinois Universalist Convention sold the Church of the Redeemer to Greater Union Baptist Church, a Black Baptist congregation founded in 1908 that has maintained the building as a spiritual, social and cultural home in the Near West Side for nearly a century.

Like many of Chicago's Black churches, Greater Union's organizational roots began with a small group of the faithful who began meeting and building up a congregation years before settling in a church building. For Greater Union, the story began in 1908, when Rev. Harry K. Knight gathered a small group of worshippers named the Friendship Baptist Church. For two decades the congregation grew under the leadership of Rev. Knight, followed by Rev. Russell Cooper and Rev. Moore. During the early years the congregation was peripatetic, worshipping in eleven places on the Near West Side between 1908 and 1928.

Greater Union Baptist Church traces its origins to a group of worshippers that gathered in 1908 under the leadership of Rev. Harry K. Knight. (Credit: Greater Union Baptist Church)

This period of time on the Near West Side corresponded with a period of growth of the Black community there driven by the Great Migration, though African American were settling in this western part of Chicago prior to the Civil War. The historiography of the Black community in Chicago has tended to focus on South Side, and Bronzeville in particular, often overlooking Chicago's second largest concentrations of African Americans on the Near West Side. In 1999, historian Dr. Christopher Robert Reed published "Beyond Chicago's Black Metropolis: A History of the West Side's First Century, 1837-1940" which provides context for the time and place in which Greater Union Baptist Church put down its roots. Black settlement in the neighborhood began on Lake Street extending west from Racine Avenue and for several blocks north and south of Lake Street. Greater Union was located squarely within this area of Black settlement.

Reed notes that the African Americans arriving in the Near West Side from the lower South adhered to traditions of family, community consciousness and church attendance. Providence Baptist Church, the first Black church on the Near West Side (and the city's fourth Black church), was established during the Civil War in 1863. St. Stephen African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church came to the community in 1872, followed by Friendship Baptist in 1897. By the time Greater Union Baptist began to flourish, the Near West Side was home to no fewer than 30 established Black congregations. Greater Union emerged as one of the leaders, as Reed observed:

> *As the first century of settlement came to an end, the church stood proudly as a fortress against the pressures of urban decay. If the scene along Damen Avenue south of where it intersected Lake Street signified anything, it was this formidability, both spiritual and physical. Church after church rose as parapets along Damen Avenue: Greater Union Baptist; Gammon Memorial Methodist Episcopal; St. Stephen A.M.E.; Friendship Baptist; and, St. Andrew Episcopal.*

Of this number, only Greater Union remains as an active congregation on the Damen Avenue corridor.

As noted above, the congregation bought the present building in 1928 for $37,399 from the Illinois Universalist Convention, during the pastorate of Rev. J. A. Royal who rechristened the congregation Greater Union Baptist Church. Under Rev. Royal, Greater Union Baptist joined and was active in the North Wood River Baptist Association which served the growing number of Black Baptist congregations in Chicago. Royal also organized musical events for the children of the congregation and community that were frequently covered by the *Chicago Defender*.

Rev. Royal was succeeded in 1932 by Rev. Howard W. Branch who established a popular choir that helped attract new members to Greater Union. In 1935 Branch was succeeded by Rev. Arthur Hubbard who shepherded the congregation for a decade. Hubbard expanded the congrega-

tion's social programs, including fielding a winning baseball team in a Black church league. Hubbard also hosted the annual convention of the Illinois Association of Missionary Baptists at Greater Union in 1937. From 1945 to 1947, the congregation was led by Rev. R. H. Dixon.

In 1947, Rev. Shelbia Hamilton Graham (1895-1968) began an energetic pastorship at Greater Union Baptist that would span two decades and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Rev. Graham began with capital improvements of the building and in 1951 the church was re-dedicated, an event memorialized with a granite plaque installed near the entrance. In 1953, Graham partnered with the American Red Cross to host free home nursing classes that offered training in first aid, preventive medicine and nutrition for families.

Rev. Graham embraced nonreligious political organization to promote the civil rights concerns of his congregation. In 1956 he joined 101 pastors in an open letter published in the *Chicago Tribune* urging African Americans to re-elect President Eisenhower and the Republican ticket in opposition to Democratic southern congress members who promulgated *The Southern Manifesto* that year. The manifesto defied the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision, which determined that separate school facilities for black and white school children were inherently unequal.

Rev. Graham was active in the NAACP serving as a First Vice President and Greater Union was active in supporting the Chicago Chapter of the organization with programming and membership drives during his leadership.

On Sunday, September 15, 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four girls attending Sunday School and injuring several. Two weeks later, Rev. Graham led a group of 13 Baptist ministers who raised funds for Sixteenth Street Baptist. That same year, Rev. Graham and Greater Union supported a boycott of Chicago Public Schools known as Freedom Day. The protest opposed racial segregation and overcrowding of Black schools. Greater Union Baptist was one of many Black churches and institutions that opened their doors to kids during the boycott.

In 1967 Rev. Graham was succeeded by Rev. James A. Horton who served Greater Union until 1972. Rev. Horton supported the Chicago Urban League which was active in the African American community of the Near West Side in education, employment and voter registration. To raise funds for the organization in 1971, Rev. Horton held a gospel concert at Greater Union that showcased some of the greatest gospel singers in the country, including Jessy Dixon and the Dixon Singers, Delois Barrett Campbell and the Barrett Sisters, the Norfleet Brothers and Vernon Oliver Price.

Greater Union's support of the Chicago Urban League continued under its next pastor, Rev. Robert E. Morgan who began in 1973. Rev. Sidney Davis, Jr. followed Rev. Morgan at the pulpit. He in turn was succeeded by in 1996 by Dr. Walter Arthur McCray for the first of two pastorships where he increased community outreach programs and pursued improvements to the

Rev. J. A. Royal led the congregation during its purchase of the building and rechristening it as the Greater Union Baptist Church. (Credit: Greater Union Baptist Church)

Rev. Arthur Hubbard, pastor from 1936 to 1945, expanded the congregation's social programs, including fielding a winning baseball team in a Black church league. (Credit: Greater Union Baptist Church)

Rev. Shelbia Hamilton Graham, who led the congregation from 1947 to 1967, embraced nonreligious political organization during the Civil Rights Movement. Rev. Graham, second from the left, helped raise money for the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama after it was bombed in 1963, killing four girls. (Credit: *The Chicago Defender,* Sep. 28, 1963)

An Easter gathering at Greater Union recorded on film Sunday, April 8, 1945. (Credit: congregation member Freddie Bogan)

Under the leadership of Rev. Robert E. Morgan, Greater Union Baptist acquired a church bus in 1975 which helped bring young people to worship and social programs. (Credit: archives of Greater Union Baptist Church)

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray served as pastor at Greater Union Baptist Church from 1996 until 2002, and he returned to the pulpit in 2018 and continues to serve. McCray is a biblical scholar who has written and lectured about scripture from an Afrocentric perspective. (Credit: *The Chicago Defender*)

building. Dr. McCray played a key role in leading the congregation to care for homeless men. He headed the House of Daniel Outreach Mission Christian Center, a 24/7 shelter that offered a full continuum of services for 50 homeless men, and was located within walking distance of the church.

Dr. McCray served until 2002 when he left the pastorship to continue his writing ministry. Between 2002 and 2018, Greater Union was led by four pastors: Rev. Gerald Hicks (2002-2005), Rev. Edgar A. Mullins (2005-2007), Rev. Robert A. Anderson (2007-2011) and Rev. Willie Morris, Jr. (2011-2018).

In 2018, Rev. Dr. McCray returned to lead Greater Union and serves as the current pastor. Dr. McCray is the noted author of the pioneering two-volume series *The Black Presence in the Bible* that has received national and international recognition. As a result, venues for his services have not only included local churches, Christian organizations, denominational associations and gatherings, community groups and organizations, and social service agencies, but also, senior citizens in public housing, the marketplace, and the media.

The oral histories at the end of this report were conducted by Preservation Chicago with members of the congregation who volunteered their time to discuss their histories and experiences of the Greater Union Baptist Church during the twentieth century. A clear picture emerges from these interviews that Greater Union has long been a center of spiritual and community life on the Near West Side. Certain pastors like Rev. Shelbia Hamilton Graham and Rev. Dr. Walter McCray stand out as leaders of the congregation. Other figures also feature prominently, such as Deacon, or "Deac" Ray Brown, a mentor who led the Shepherd Boys, a well-respected outreach program for young men in the neighborhood, and there was Barbara Theus who led the Girls' Auxiliary. There was also Maudine McCurine who directed the Missionary Women, which provided aid to the those in need in the community.

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Section 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of Landmark designation for a building, structure, object, or district if the Commission determines that it meets two or more of the stated "Criteria for Designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of historic design integrity. The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Greater Union Baptist Church be designated as a Chicago Landmark:

Criterion 1: Critical Part of the City's History

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- Greater Union Baptist Church exemplifies the important role that religious institutions played in the development and sustenance of Chicago's neighborhoods.

- The structure was built in 1886 as the Church of the Redeemer, a Universalist congregation which in addition to worship attended to the social and cultural needs of the community though charitable work, musical programs and lectures.

- The congregation of the Church of the Redeemer was founded in 1858, and during the Civil War, the pastor and forty men of the congregation volunteered to serve in the Union Army to end the enslavement of African Americans.

- Between 1886 and 1928, the congregation of the Church of the Redeemer hosted events and lectures that reflected Progressive Era concerns such as temperance, women's right-to-vote, confronting racial division and the welfare of children.

- Between 1914 and 1917, the Church of the Redeemer hosted a series of weekly lectures known as the West Side People's Forum which was part of a national initiative known as the Open Forum Movement which centered on public lectures to create a more informed and democratic public.

- In 1928, the church was rechristened as the Greater Union Baptist Church when it was purchased by a Black Baptist congregation that was founded in 1908, and that has maintained the building as a spiritual, social and cultural home in the Near West Side for nearly a century.

- Greater Union Baptist Church has been shepherded by pastors and members of the congregation who contributed to the social and cultural well being of the Near West Side through social programs for young people, charitable outreach and fellowship.

- In addition to worship and fellowship, the congregation at Greater Union Baptist Church has engaged in the Civil Rights Movement through support of the NAACP, the Chicago Urban League and nonreligious organization.

Criterion 3: Significant Person

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- Rev. Shelbia Hamilton Graham (pastor from 1947-1967) used his pulpit at Greater Union to support the spiritual needs of his congregation and social needs of African American community at large. During the Civil Rights Movement. Rev. Graham was active in the NAACP, aided the victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, and opposed discrimination and overcrowding in schools.

- Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray (pastor from 1996-2002, and 2018 to present) has increased Greater Union Baptist Church's community outreach. Rev. Dr. McCray is also an influential biblical scholar who has written and lectured about scripture from a Black and Afrocentric perspective.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.

- Greater Union Baptist Church is a massively scaled and well proportioned brick church with distinct terra cotta details.

- With its massive masonry walls, round-arched entrances and windows and ornament based on medieval foliate and geometric ornament, design of Greater Union Baptist Church reflects the influence of the Romanesque Revival style of architecture.

- Greater Union Baptist Church features well-designed and high-crafted stained glass windows designed by the Chicago firm McCully & Miles including a depiction of the Parable of the Sower, a recreation of the *Sistine Madonna*, and an allegorical representation of charity.

Criterion 5: Important Architect

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- Greater Union Baptist Church was designed by William Le Baron Jenney, a Chicago architect who achieved national significance for the development of the steel-framed skyscraper, and who articulated a design philosophy that helped pave the way for progressive architecture to flourish in Chicago in the late-nineteenth century.

- William Le Baron Jenney designed a wide range of building types, including four churches. Greater Union Baptist Church is one of only three surviving church buildings designed by the architect and the most intact with respect to Jenney's original design.

- The design of Greater Union Baptist Church reflects aspects of William Le Baron Jenney design philosophy, specifically the building's emphasis on mass and large proportions, clearly-expressed structural stability through thick walls and interior trusses, and ornament that is integrated into the wall structure rather than applied to it.

Integrity Criterion

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architecture or aesthetic value.

Greater Union Baptist Church boasts excellent physical integrity to convey its cultural history and architectural value, especially considering that for most of its 136-year history it has served a community that has endured economic decline. Credit for the building's fine integrity is due to the current congregation who has maintained the fabric for 94 years at time of writing.

The building remains in its original location at the intersection of Warren Boulevard and Damen Avenue, which was at the center of African American settlement on the West Side during the Great Migration.

The setting around the building has changed considerably due to the construction of the United Center and its associated parking lots. The residential neighborhood that formed the context and housed the congregants has been diminished. Greater Union Baptist Church is this a rare survivor which argues further for its preservation.

Changes to the exterior of the building include a new roof, now asphalt shingle instead of slate, and new entrance doors. These changes are typical and do not detract from the buildings integrity.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for Landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the significant historical and architectural features of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered the most important to preserve the historic and architectural character of the proposed Landmark. Based on its evaluation of the Greater Union Baptist Church, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.

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Greater Union Baptist Church Oral History Transcripts

Interview with parishioners Adrienne Thompson, John Spence, Carolyn Turner, Barbara Theus and Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray. Conducted by Mary Lu Seidel of Preservation Chicago on September 12, 2022.

Mary Lu Seidel
All right, please state your name and spell it for us.

Adrienne Thompson
Adrienne Alexander Thompson.

Mary Lu Seidel
Thanks.

John Spence
John Spence.

Carolyn Turner
Carolyn Turner.

Mary Lu Seidel
Thank you. Thank you all for having names that are easy to spell. That's very helpful. How long have you been a parishioner at Greater Union Baptist Church?

Carolyn Turner
I was born here. I will be 80 in February. So, it would have been 80 years. Yeah, I've been here all my life.

John Spence
Eighteen years.

Mary Lu Seidel
And of course, Adrienne.

Adrienne Thompson
Eighty-five years old. I've been here all my life, and it's been a joy.

Mary Lu Seidel
Carolyn, with your family, did they come here? How far back does your family go with Greater Union Baptist?

Carolyn Turner
My grandmother came here from Alabama with her sons, they were adult sons. And she joined here, with us living in the neighborhood. Those that came my way, our way, came to Greater Union. So, I mean, being born here…then my children were here. My marriage was here, my baptism was here. Everything was here. So, this is how we came to be a part of Greater Union, through my grandmother.

Mary Lu Seidel
John, what brought you here?

John Spence
I was invited by one of the members here, Freddie Bogan. Never made a bad mistake when he did that for me. And it brought me close to the Lord and made me to realize that I got some help and all I gotta do is call him. And I thank Freddie Bogan for that. And I've been here ever since. And then the other thing was that the address is my birthday: 1956. And that played a big part in it, too. I just want to thank Freddie Bogan for doing that and, also, he gave me some employment and directed my life to change, with the change that I took on, and it's been really, really joyful and I'm so glad to be at Greater Union.

Adrienne Thompson
Okay, my grandparents, maternal and paternal, came to Chicago in the 1920s. And they both end up joining Greater Union. So, naturally, when I came after my mother and father married, I came along, me and my three brothers, which are all deceased now, and I am still here. And this has been a real blessing. We've lived in the neighborhood, and at that time people walked to church. It was houses all around here long before United Center. It was always packed in this church. It's just been a real blessing. Our children are baptized here, and we baptize downstairs in the pool on the floor. And it's just a blessing. All the children. My children were Christian here. And they did that as babies. My oldest daughter had a wedding here on a Saturday evening and it was, like, I don't know. It was just unreal. This place was packed, but it was such a beautiful, blessed occasion. I thank God, but she's no longer with us. She had cancer.

Mary Lu Seidel
So, John, do you want to tell us a little story about—you grew up in this neighborhood, you were born and raised down the street, you want to tell us your story about your impressions of this place when you were growing up? And then as your life evolved, and you grew, what circumstances led you here? And what impact has that had on your life?

John Spence
Well, I was gang affiliated when I was coming up, and we had different territories that we had to respect, and we couldn't come across Damen because Greater Union wasn't tolerating a lot of behavior like that. We had a mentor; his name was Ray Brown. He kept law and order, a very Christian man, and everybody respected him.

A gathering of young people at Greater Union Baptist Church from around 1960. (Credit: congregation member Freddie Bogan)

Adrienne Thompson
Yes.

John Spence
And then he opened up the doors for gang members to come in peace. We used the downstairs facility to come and talk about the differences that we had in the neighborhood. He was a great mentor. And in the process of that, too, we used Greater Union. So, Greater Union kept the heat that was rising, it kept it down to a certain limit and we all grew to start loving on one another. And then we end up coming here. Shuffleboards, going downstairs playing pool, ping-pong, going to Great America on trips. They had a church bus they used to take us, and then take us back to our house at the right proper time. So, he was teaching us, you know, a better way of life other than just fighting one another. This is a pillar of this community. And it's still going on, I would recommend somebody to come here. You know, invite them same way it was brought to me, and it has done a marvelous job. Because it worked with me, I never thought I'd change. But I did. And this is part of it, you got me talking this way right now and letting you know my testimony, as well as my journey I'm still on. It has made me a better man, a better father, and a better grandfather.

Carolyn Turner
Praise God.

Mary Lu Seidel
And did you raise your children here at the church?

Adrienne Thompson
I did.

Carolyn Turner
Yes.

Adrienne Thompson
Three girls and three boys. I can say Deacon had the Shepherd Boys, Sister [unclear] had the Girls' Auxiliary. And these children, like I said, houses were all around at that time. So, they bought other children in with children. It's kind of hard sometimes for grown folk. They may not understand the child, but they will understand someone their age, so they had plenty of kids here. We traveled with these kids, I've taken them to Six Flags down in Atlanta, Georgia, to Stone Mountain. Took them to New York, to the Niagara Falls. We just traveled a lot with the children, we have things for them to do other than right here at the church building. [unintelligible] So, it's just been a real joy.

And then even after United Center came over here, we can always use the parking lot. So, I did Back to School rallies for the children, which we would give out school supplies and one of my cousins at that time worked for Scholastic Books. And he would always donate carts and carts of books for the church, and we will pass them out to the children in the community, too. So, it's just been a real blessing here at this church and what it meant to the community, to the young and old. And then you know as time changed and the houses moved out, the membership kind of went down some. But before then, we were alive and well. All the time.

Carolyn Turner
As I was sitting here, I was thinking about the past and I am sitting in the very seat that I sat in in the evening that we had the service to come to join the church. My brothers and I were sitting here, and we all came forward at that time. And like I said, I was just sitting here, this is the same seat that I was sitting in as a child, and I was about six or seven when I accepted Christ. Other than my training at home, my Christian education at home, I received the other here in this church. You know, it's just marvelous when you can look back, and follow your steps and see where you've been and where you're going and taking it through. Like she was saying, my grandmother sang in the gospel chorus, that was with Mabel White. My mother sang with the senior choir, and that was Professor Henderson. I did not get into the choir until I was about 13 or 14, which I was underage. But Maudine Wordlaw was over the youth choir, and she asked my mother to let me join, because everybody else was older than me. And she said, I'll take care of her, which she did. She didn't let me get away with anything. You know, it was just a pleasant place to be. And Reverend Wordlaw now. She was very musically inclined, and I attribute a lot of my music education to her.

When I got old enough to start dating and getting married, I married here. And I have four chil-

dren, Four of them with baptized here, downstairs, except for the last one. She was baptized in the pool there. And they have gone on to their way, but they accepted Christ here. And what they know, what they learned, came from here—the basis. It's just been wonderful. It made me think back over the years, and it was just wonderful. But now that, you know, I think back over and Greater Union was always a place of safety. You know, you knew that everything was going to be okay at Greater Union.

John Spence
Mmm. Yes, yes.

Carolyn Turner
At that time, there were pastors that came, this particular one Reverend Shelby Hamilton Graham—he's the one that I really knew as my pastor. There were those before me, but when you're young, you don't see anything. You don't see anything. But then you get to this point. Reverend Graham is the person that is the minister that baptized me. And he said something that has stuck with me throughout my life, and he would tell the teenagers, "If you don't want to see it in tomorrow's headline, don't do it today." And that just kind of, you know, keeps you going and makes you think before you get into trouble. And he was he was just there for all of us. And like I say, I was married here. My children were baptized and christened here. And it's just been such a blessing just to have been a part of this. Now, I did go away for about five, six years because I moved out of town. But, when I came back to Chicago, the first place I wanted to be, I said, "Greater Union." Because I knew the love and everything that was here. And that's what I wanted, I wanted to feel that love and I still feel that, when I walk into those doors, I still feel the love that emanates from this place. And Lord continues to be with me this is where I leave from. [Break in recording]

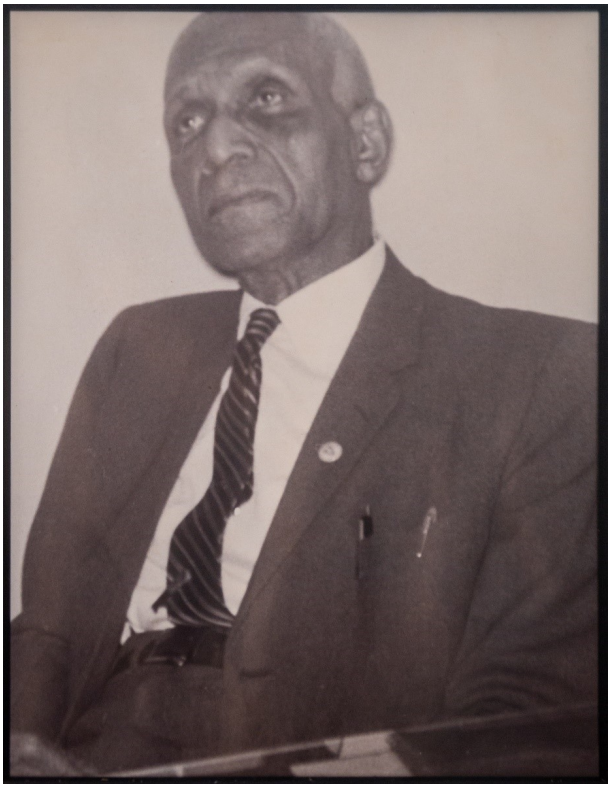
Barbara Theus
Barbara Theus.

Mary Lu Seidel
So, we're going to be asking questions, direct and individually. But why don't we start with you since you're new to the group this morning? How long have you been with Greater Union Baptist Church? And if you weren't from here originally, and came here later, you know, where do you come from?

Barbara Theus
Ever since I was a child, I grew up in the Sunday School department. And I was baptized at the age of nine, after I went to juniors' department, because at that time, Reverend Graham was our pastor. He would come around every first Sunday, to each Sunday school department and talk about being a Christian, and what it meant. He also said where the devil at. So, one Sunday, when he did come to the juniors' department, he painted such a terrible picture of Hell, I knew I didn't want to go there. I joined church right then and there. And that was at the age of nine.

And I've been here ever since. So, I'm 78 now. So, I grew up and my grandmother was on the Mother's Board and my mother served in different capacities besides being a cook later on, after the other cooks retired, she became a cook, but she also kept up with the children. She was in BTU, we had BTU every Sunday. She had those kids. She didn't teach Sunday school, but she kept up with kids when, you know, the parents weren't around because she was always here. So, I have that background, grandmother and mother being here in the church all the time, until they passed away.

But her major thing was being in the kitchen, she loved to cook. And she loved people. And she definitely loved children, because during that time, you didn't have different caregivers and takers for children and parents who work out. Our house was always full because different ones here at the church had children. And she could take care of him. They were at our house. So, in some ways, I kind of followed her footsteps. But as I grew and got older and reached the age where I could do things, I became a Sunday school teacher through Miss Henderson, who played a big part of my life. Mrs. Graham, the pastor's wife. So, I became a Sunday school teacher, and I taught Sunday school until, you know, we kind of faded out because we didn't have the children anymore. And during that time, also, we were part of the district, the state, and the national conventions. I traveled to those. As a youth, I attended the Youth on the March which was every month from one church to the other and participated in that. So, I have really participated in just about everything.



Rev. Shelbia Hamilton Graham (pastor from 1947 -1967) used his pulpit at Greater Union to support the spiritual needs of his congregation and social needs of African American community at large. (Credit: Greater Union Baptist Church)

I've ushered here in Greater Union. I have sung in the choir, even the children's choir that we had before we formally formed a regular children's choir. We would have Miss Willie Williams doing Easter, Christmas. She would teach us songs because we celebrate those days. And she would teach us songs to sing during that time, Easter or Christmas. And I sang in that. And then from there, I went to the young adult choir, I sang there. When they phased out. I sang with the gospel chorus and Inspiration for Us, which was at one time the senior choir. So, I've been in music. I've been in a District Association, and I'm still part of the districts. Different ones, this district, the state and the national. Just in the last past six, eight months I haven't been able to do anything because I had cancer. And I say I had cancer; I believe I'm healed. And, but I have been a regular, attended everything. I attend to everything. You say go; I went. I say took the kids, the children, the young folks, I work with them.

Then, my children, I only had two. I had two children, but I had so many grandkids. I had four grandkids. And they were all raised here until they became grown and went other places. It's been a journey. And I always go back to where the pastor that I grew up under, Reverend Graham, he said, you can attend other churches because he would give us the keys—those who was able to drive at the time, I had the driver's license—he would give the keys to his car to us to go other churches and see what they were doing. And he said, "What you learn some of it you can bring back. And some of you can't. But you know, go see what other churches are doing." It didn't matter what denomination, as long as we were learning something. And we always attended the Midwest Baptist Youth Conference, I was part of that. So, I've just been here, a part of everything. And like I said, have done everything but preach. I served as church clerk; I served as helper in the kitchen. And as I said before, I have taught Sunday school until our Sunday School just kind of phased out a little bit. But I would always, even when I wasn't teaching, I would help whoever was teaching, trying to give them a little advice on what to do.

And now, no matter where I go, it's always Barbara, can you do this? Can you do that? You know, you know how to do this. You come from a church who did all this. So, I've just been around a long time. Right now, I'm between…not between churches because Greater Union will always my home. As I tell pastors of other churches, when I go to visit, I say, "I can't leave my home church that I grew up in." Because right now, because I like to be among people on Sunday. I'm going to church with my sister who grew up here. And Reverend Smith of Freedom, and Hillside. He's always teasing me, "When are you coming down the aisle?" Because I'm there so much and everybody knows me. I said, "Well, maybe not right now." It may come to a point where I have to. But I can't leave Greater Union as long as Greater Union is alive and still open. So, it's just been a good thing. I have been taught a lot; I learned a lot. And a lot of things that I learned; I learned right here in Greater Union. Even when I went into the workforce, they would ask me, "How you know how to do this? All those parts of your job, but you do it in such a way. It's like it's an asset." My church. We were taught not only to be able to do things in the church, but on the outside. And so, when I went to workforce, I was always upfront. I think that's why I got most of my promotions.

I finally retired during COVID. I had worked 54 years. And if COVID hadn't come along, I'll probably still be working. Because I love to work. I love to be around people. Because we were taught to be lovable, and try to be lovable, and love other people and do things that would make people enjoy being around us. So, like I said, everything. I've heard some of the things that they are talking about. So, I'm just telling you my experience right now because I've experienced basically the same things. But, I just love being in church. I love being God's worker, and server. And I'm so happy He loves me because I am here today. I'm a witness that He is real. Because when cancer came along, I thought it was going to take me out at this age, but I'm still here. I'm still here. And again, it's just been a joy being a member of Greater Union from a child to this age than I am now. As long as I'm living, Greater Union will be my church.

Mary Lu Seidel
I was doing some math in my head. between the four of you, you have close to 200 years at the church. Does that sound as impressive to you as it does to me? It's a lot of years, pushing 200.

Adrienne Thompson
And I was just thinking, as Barbara was talking about the workforce, what we learned, certainly went off to the world. I worked for the Board of Education for 34 years, and everywhere I went to different schools. I started off as a teacher aide. Then I was a school clerk. And then I was the school truant officer, and when they cut the truant officers, they say, "You don't never break a bridge that you might have to cross again." I went back to one of my schools. And when I went back in after the truant officer, they asked me would I want to go back to Faraday School. I say, "Sure, I can go back." And it was just open arms, they welcomed me back. That was a school of every nationality. And that was just unreal, the parents, the children. I get to work sometime in the morning, early, and the parents crossing the street and they invite me over for breakfast. I mean, it was just unreal when I think about it. And talking about the district and whatnot. Yeah.

I was in the music, I played for the Sunday school up until it just wasn't happening. We still had that going on here. Greater Union has meant a lot to this community and to the people. And one thing, on Sunday morning, we'd be up there singing. Reverend Morgan would have Dr. Sweeney, President of the Moody Bible Institute. He would come and preach, and I could see him coming up that stairway there. And we had dynamic music. I mean, the anthems, the Gospels, You are talkin' music, and we had some great musicians here. And I could see us singing one Sunday morning, as he came up those stairs, "Let Mount Zion Rejoice". And I tell you, this church would be on fire. It has just been a real blessing that experience that we have had here. I'm telling you, the people, you said Miss Henderson was a true trooper. We've had some folks who have gone long and are really troopers. And talking about eating, we had the best food there ever was here. We had the best cooks. Her mother [gestures to Barbara] used to make rolls, hot rolls. My mother made rolls. They're gone now and we don't have any left. But it has been a real blessing. I tell you, it's been a real joy. God has truly been good.

Rev. Morgan guided Greater Union Baptist Church from 1973 until 1990. He oversaw renovations of the building and acquisition of a church van and bus to improve outreach to the community. (Credit: Greater Union Baptist Church)

Carolyn Turner
I just wanted to say about the environment that we're sitting in now. This window here behind me, before they built that building across the street, in the certain part of the day, when the sun is going down, it will come through that window. And it would be so—it would be the place if you wanted to have some peace and some quiet and you just want to meditate, to come up here and sit and watch that sun go down through that window with all those colors and so forth. And you know, things like that. Things like that about the church. I've always remembered. Always remembered. I think you spoke on this stained glass. I really don't know the originality of it. I really don't know. But you know, we've had incidents where we've had to replace small little things like so forth. But as far as I can remember, that's all I've ever seen. That's all I've ever seen, and not just that. You looked at the pipes up there for the organ, it was a pipe organ in that day, yes. And, you know, as we were talking, my mind is just going back and it's just such a wonderful memory, a wonderful memory. And whenever I have out of town company from way back, they say, "Is Greater Union still there?" Of course, it's still there! Where is it going? You know. Then they'll drive by and pull up and say, "That church is just beautiful." Some of them get to come in. The church has so much…I've got goosebumps when I talk about it because like I said, these are the windows that I can—I don't remember anything other than these windows. And like I say, it's almost 80 years now. And I think they're just gorgeous. They're just gorgeous.

John Spence
I just want to—she was saying, she was talking about the choir and the music department. And it's just a sight to see. And like she was speaking about the building that's blocked the view. When the choir used to sing, and the Lord was pleased with the melody of the music and the tempos that went high. And that voices were raised high. And this is the truth. They can tell you

themselves, a burst of light from the sun will come in this magnificence. Amazing. It's amazing. The light, just coming in, He's pleased. The music that's flowing through these ladies' voices, and the music department, the music is going. It's just tremendous. And this, this, this establishment, that's right here has passed—oh, you say some heavy hitters, they had some heavy hitters. This church was known for the quality of good music, gospel music, hymns. I'm just so glad I got the opportunity to experience that. I can share it. And it's what I'm trying to do now. And hopefully, someone you know, will visit us when it's time for us to get back to the Lord's work that we're supposed to be doing. And what's going to happen. We just wanted to share it.

Carolyn Turner
I want to talk about different music. My daughter's at a different church right now where they don't sing the hymns like we were raised on. We were raised on the hymns. One of the directors was trying to teach hymns. And she's just singing it. Just singing it. You know, I was born with this. I was born with this kind of music. And so, singing the Gospels and the hymns and anthems. All this is what we were privy to. You know, we were just exposed to all of that good stuff that we had. People that really love the Lord, not looking for accolades, but really loving the Lord and playing the music from their hearts. Of course, when they were doing it from their heart, that just spill over to our hearts and we had some good music up in here.

Mary Lu Seidel
So, we have pastor McCray joining us here. And Adrienne—

Adrienne Thompson
Yeah, I was gonna say, since we were talking so much about the music. One thing we had here was a graded choir system. Different ages sang different songs. And there were songs that was relative to that group. You didn't sing some songs that you have not had that kind of experience, like with the older people, but not the children who started in the Sunday school. And I think everybody learn "Father Abraham", it was one of them, one of them and whatnot, and all the different songs. And then we had the children's choir, then we had the junior choir. Then we had the young adult choir. And then we had the singing choir. And so, everybody sang a variety of music, but relevant to their age. And that was one thing that really kept our music ministry here, rich. I mean—and it was just unreal. And I hadn't mentioned nothing about my mother. My mother was one of the great soloists here, I must say to give it to her. I mean, she could sing a song and the pastor—most times the rotation always would call on her. And then we had others also. But my mother had a contralto voice, Lord Jesus. I know she's singing in the heavenly choir. And I know it has to be great.

Mary Lu Seidel
John, I was wondering, can you tell me more about the Shepherd Boys program? And then maybe one of you could talk about the Auxiliary Girls program, right? That was the two youth programs. If you could tell me about the Shepherd Boys program that you were involved with?

John Spence
Well, the Shepherd Boys was like a Boys and Girls Club. And what it did, it draw all the people that maybe was nonbelievers to learn to believe. And had pool tables and ping pong. And then after that, later on, you stay there quite a while. And then the parents trusted where you put the kids to be. It's because they knew we was put in the right hands. And it brought the family closer together. And then it also made you spread the word. Because when you spread the word, some more kids want to [unintelligible]. It just like all of us was together. But the main thing was about teaching each one of us about Christ. And that played a part in our lives, even those that's not here, that they've gone on. It made them become teachers and preachers. And they're still in the ministry and doing stuff, telling somebody about Christ, even though they are probably in another church. But they're still talking about Christ. So, Shepherd Boys was the main focus, and then also. What did I just say, Brotherhood? From Shepherd Boys, you went straight to Brotherhood. So, that was a joyful thing. People took the time with you. And that was straight from the heart.

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray
In terms of Shepherd Boys stewardship. This church utilized every inch of this facility. Shepherd Boys was in the basement of the church, okay. And that's where the pool tables and other things were for the Shepherd Boys. In perspective, it would have been an alternative to gangs, all right? In a positive way. Located in the church going from Shepherd Boys to Brotherhood where Black males associated with one another. And it was a safe space. Historically, that's the importance of Shepherd Boys and the Brotherhood these days. If there were more Brotherhoods, then there would be less gangs. More Brotherhoods centered in the churches. Yes.

Barbara Theus
And on the other hand, the Girls Auxiliary, which met on the same days as the Shepherd Boys, it was the same thing. To give young people something to do after school. And after I took over, because I used to help the lady who was the supervisor, and I don't know how I became supervisor after she gave it up. But I have been coming to GAs, I had grown up and after I became a young lady, I would come and help her. I became supervisor. And I, the girls, we did the same thing. We would have Bible study, we would have playtime, but the most enjoyable that I remember, we were also taught how to—you know, when you take the young lady out, or you go out to dinner. We would have dinner at least once a month. The girls would cook one month and the boys, the young men would—we taught them how to pull out the ladies' chair, you tell them how to set the tables. Then one month, you would switch the next month. And we would do that. We taught the young people how to do things, not just here in church, but when you go out, so you will give a good representation of who you are. Everybody can learn how to be, uh—trying to think of the word. You know, you have to be polite.

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray
Etiquette.

Barbara Theus
That's the word. We taught that. We would learn how to sew. And we taught the young ladies and young men how to cook. The young men had to learn how to cook too because you may have to be on your own one day. Your mama is not always going to be around cook for you. How to clean, we had to clean up afterwards. So, I have worked with young people ever since I can remember. Because I was taught to do that. And when I don't have anything, you come help. You know, you just didn't sit. You had to do something. So, I got involved in being supervisor of a lot of things. And like I said once before, I also go involved in being supervisor at other churches. Like I said, we were part of the district, the state, and the national. And whatever we were doing, "Barb, you know how to do this, come help, come teach, come do whatever." And I have three sisters and three brothers. We're all over. One is in Georgia. One is in California. He's a deacon now. But all our learning comes back to here at Greater Union. And people recognize that.

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray
I was gonna say something, too, because a lot of references being made to the past and some may not see the relationship between some of the present. And the past. This, of course, this church is a community of Henry Horner Housing Development. And so, there were the high-rises. A number of them, you know, from—this is Damen here, on both sides of Damen, almost down to Western. Those buildings were torn down, demolished, and they are now low-rise houses. Okay, in that quarter. Now, if you talk about and some of the families who lived in the high-rises are living in the low-rises, okay, some of them. And so, there's a historical continuity there. Well, if, if we would go up through there and talk to some brothers who were 50 or 60 years old, who have been here a long time in the area and reference the Shepherd Boys, Deac—

John Spence
Ray Brown.

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray
Deacon Ray Brown. Then they would say, "Yeah, I knew Deac." All right. So, you talk about a present impact that had an influence on those 50, 60 years old. Today, Deac been gone for, you know, about 15 years. Home with the Lord. But he impacted hundreds of young men, boys at the time from this area. All right. And that impact still remains in terms of the curriculum of Shepherd Boys program. All right. And that is so interesting.

We did a funeral service this year of a person. And at the service, some musician was there. And some others were there, all right. I was preaching the sermon, and the Lord told me to talk about Deac. And I didn't understand that when I was preparing, but I was faithful and did that and mentioned Deac. And do you know, that resonated with some of the older ones who were there? The musicians, as well as the ones who was sitting in the pew and, and I just stepped back and let them talk. I was up preaching, but the Lord said, "Let 'em talk." It rang a bell with

them. “Oh yeah, I'm knew him. And I grew up with him,” and so on and so forth. And they gave the testimony. So that's some of the impact of Greater Union here.

And then, I want to jump in terms of—this was a church corridor. Okay. Let's talk about the other churches that were in this area. Okay, we're talking about Friendship Baptist Church, pastored by Dr. Shelvin Hall who is home with the Lord. That was one block over here. Okay. Across the street from Friendship was the St. Stephen's African Methodist Episcopal Church. All right. Pastored by Dr. Wilfred Reed, and then later on by Reverend Albert Tyson. Okay, it burned. Wow, 20 years ago. Burned to the ground like Antioch on the South Side. St. Stephen's burned one block from here. And then we had Gammon Memorial Methodist Church, CME Church, in the same corner. Those other churches moved to different locations. But Greater Union remains—cultural significance and denominational or church significance of this particular congregation. Right. It has remained at this spot. The others have moved other places and in serving the community, you know, Amen. But Greater Union is still here.

Adrienne Thompson
When St. Stephen's burned, I was working over here, Sunday school at that time and I saw them it was up on the roof. And that church when it burned, I was standing right outside there. When Reverend Tyson, they had to call him. And because they tore the building all the way down to the ground, you know, you had to have a parking lot now. So, that was the reason they could not rebuilt back on that same [unintelligible] but think about the four churches on Sunday mornings. This whole area would be packed, every one of these churches would be packed on Sunday morning. I don't know what the Gammon Memorial is still functioning, but Friendship is another church in there now. But we the only church here on this corner. We've always been very tight in the community, always tight, close relationship. And then we, as children traveled to the National Baptist Convention, I know I went there with Pastor Green. He took us to the National Baptist Convention. And then we have traveled to them, obviously, and always to this district and the state, the Sunday School Baptist Conference. And then in 1950, we hosted the National Baptist Sunday School Congress here. And we have to use the other two churches, Friendship and St. Stephen's at that time, because we needed room for people. And that was, I was talking to her, we grew up together. We had called ourselves 85 years old, we’ll all be 85 this year and the Lord has still blessed us. But it was just unreal. About seven girls still left, they’re women now, girls I grew up with. Our destinations have changed some, but we still came from this first, strong church here in Greater Union. So, it’s been a real blessing.

Mary Lu Seidel
John, you had wanted to make a point before.

John Spence
The most—to me the most—that I like is when you come into the church and you see the building, and you pull up outside. That's the most important part that I like, you know, when you pull up, if you make that turn when you are riding down Madison and you look over here and you

know that's the direction that you are going and just pull up outside in the front. It's a good building.

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray
My introduction to this church was under Pastor Robert E. Morgan. I was a young man in the ministry, early 70s. Late 60s, early 70s. And I walked up those steps and was smitten in my heart. Fell in love with this worship sanctuary. This is a worshipful place. It draws us out of ourselves and up to God. And the architect did a tremendous job, the previous congregation was the Church of the Redeemer. But it's theater. It's close. It sits a lot of folks, get about 500 people up in here, I would say. It's a good aesthetic. It's a good spirit there. And I thank God for that. I was telling the congregation yesterday morning which was 9/11/22. I came down to the church early Sunday morning by myself. And I took my position up in the pulpit. And I just had me a personal worship time and experience with the Lord up in here. And I thank God my first journey is pastor of the church.

The stained-glass window to the north was restored. And that is the Sower, and that is so significant. The Sower goes out to sow and the crop comes in. We are some of the crops of those who sowed. We are the legacy of those who sowed a long time ago. Amen. And there are still some seeds that stand to germinate and to bloom. And that's why we remain faithful here. Have there been others who want to buy this place? Yes, there have been those who want to buy this place. And a whole lot of other things that have gone on with the building, from the stadium to the United Center, all the changes and all the gentrification that's taking place in the area. But God has told this people, "Stay here." Keep your roots here, maintain the legacy here. Change, yes, we got to change. Change is not optional, we must change. But change in a good way. In the best way. There are certain traditions that are integral to the beginning of any organization or institution or any church. And those traditions must be maintained. There are some other traditions that you let go. But some of the core traditions must be maintained. And some of that is good music. Some of the good preaching, some of us do good teaching, some of is good fellowship and food.

Adrienne Thompson
Amen. Amen. Amen.
[All laugh]

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray
Those core traditions have to be maintained, as well as the impact of the church radiating the impact for the community. So, we got to change to meet a new demographic, but we're faithful to God. That's what we want to do here. So, we see a juxtaposition of the building landmark status, and the spiritual status inherited of the church that dovetail here, this is a great thing that's taking place.

Mary Lu Seidel

I know we're gonna run out of battery in a little bit. So, I want to ask the question and if we run out of time today, if anybody wants to come back tomorrow, we can do that. But, if you can do a few in a minute or so, if you could give a message to the city of Chicago, the people and leadership about the idea of landmarking this church. Why, you know, if you could testify, what it means to you, why this church is important to you, and why it should be Landmarked by the city of Chicago to protect it.

Carolyn Turner
As I stated before, I was gone for about six years. And when I came back to Chicago, this was the only church that I stepped into to say, you know, and it's like, I'm going home. This is a place where you once you become a part of it, you feel like this is home. This is home. The love and the camaraderie and the cooking. You know, the dinners that we share, and the sadness that we share, and the joy that we share. I just feel like Chicago is blessed to have this church on this corner, saying here we are. Come. Come.

Adrienne Thompson
As Carolyn mentioned, the dinners. And I want to say about why it should be a status here. This is important here for Greater Union, to be this corner and to still be here. Our church will celebrate 114 years this year. And like I said, my grandparents came here. It means a lot to me. And to have that Landmark status here... I lived in this area…well I've been out 54 years; I live southeast now. And one of my brothers say, "I guess you will change churches now since you moved." I told him, "Did you change your tavern?
[All laugh]

Adrienne Thompson
So, I have been coming to this West Side, most of my schools were on the West Side, the only one I had South Side was DuSable High School, and I was there for truant officer. And during that time, truancy was really bad. But because I'm a representative of Christ, of Greater Union Baptist Church, it has meant a lot to me. And I still come back and forth. Every time the church doors open, if something's going on, I am here. And I love this place.

John Spence
I just get one, just one, one specific thing just to say. It's the right thing to do.

Barbara Theus
I can say it's the right thing to do, but due to our history here on this corner, young people, old people, whatever you want to say, have come through here. They made a mark maybe someplace else, but they're out there at other churches, other jobs, when it comes to working each day. Their history starts here. And if we can continue, and we should continue with God's help, we will produce others who can go out and make a mark on themselves that will reflect that they grew up here in Greater Union and learn most of everything that they know. Because I know for a fact, working in the workforce, it all started here as a child. And bloomed. I had a

wonderful 54 years out there and still here in Greater Union working and that's when I came.

Mary Lu Seidel
Pastor McCray, do you want the final word?

Rev. Dr. Walter A. McCray
Those who study culture and religion, culture and the Christian faith, will let you know that the highest values of a culture are expressed in the religious or spiritual or Christian practices. As African-descended people, having community is very important. Separated from the Motherland to here. Parenthetically, the history we told, this was a tremendous African American culture and corridor, all up in this area. Folks who came from the south in the Great Migration ended up on the South Side and on the West Side here as well. There is a time in African American history that all we had was the community of the church. The church was the hub of the Black experience. Everything that took place in the African American community had its roots in the congregation – in the church. The people of God need a place to congregate. And oh Hallelujah, the elders of Greater Union Baptist Church had a vision. Those old folks. With quarters and dimes. They had a vision for this building and sacrificed in order to purchase and pay off this here facility. That the City of Chicago would make a move to preserve this on the one hand because it was built by the father of skyscrapers – Jenney – in Chicago. The other side of the coin is that this place represents the place of congregation of a people of God expressing the highest values of a people in the expressions of our Christian faith. It becomes vitally important to make, within the midst of all the changes, vitally important to preserve not just the physical piece but to preserve the symbolic place and actual meeting place of a Black people who brought community to community. That's the importance of the Landmark status. Different motives. The City may be looking at one thing. Those who love architecture are looking at one thing. Those who love worship and serving the true and living God and keeping a people cohesive in their identity and community have another value, and they can work together at this time.

Interview with former parishioners Annabelle and Andrea Bowdry, mother and daughter respectively. Conducted by Mary Lu Seidel of Preservation Chicago on October 10, 2022.

Mary Lu Seidel
Just to confirm, you're both okay with being recorded. The only way we will potentially be using the footage is if the church would like to make a short video sort of telling its story and sharing the great love and fellowship of its congregation to the world. I'd like to get a sense of how long your family has been a part of Greater Union Baptist Church.

Annabelle Bowdry
I came to Greater Union in the 1960s. I worked at Marillac House, and Barbara Bonner and Maudine Wordlaw worked there. I didn't have a church home at that time, and they kept telling me to come to Greater Union. My brother and I came to visit, and we joined. We went home and told our mother that we had joined the church, and she came with us the next Sunday. And then she joined.

Mary Lu Seidel
What is the Marillac House?

Annabelle Bowdry
It is a social center. A lot of members from Greater Union worked there. It was a daycare center, a teen center, some help for mothers with young children. It was a neighborhood community center.

Mary Lu Seidel
I love that model of community centers that are in some way sponsored by churches or certainly have church involvement. How was the Marillac House funded?

Annabelle Bowdry
It was run by the Daughters of Charity. It was a Catholic organization.

Mary Lu Seidel
I'm hoping to interview Maudine this week.

Andrea Bowdry
Oh, she's gonna give you an interview.

Annabelle Bowdry
Andrea was born in 1982. So, at that time, my whole family – including my brother and myself -- we were members of Greater Union.

Mary Lu Seidel

Andrea, how was it for you growing up with that experience?

Andrea Bowdry
Greater Union was fun. A lot of foundation was there. There was always something for us to do. Vacation Bible School. Sunday school. We had choir with Miss Morgan, what was the name? We had our children's choir. There was always something going on at Greater Union. For me growing up there from a child to a teen, to adulthood. I've noticed even at our church now we do have a children's church, but back in those days it was a little bit more foundation wise. Because a lot of churches don't have that foundation. It was a lot more structured at Greater Union. It took a village to raise a child. Everyone at Greater Union looked at your child as their child. If they told you not to do something, you didn't do it. Parents gave the right to other parents to redirect or discipline that child. And your parent found out about it later as well. These days you don't have that.

Mary Lu Seidel
Did you spend most evenings at the church, was it an all-day Sunday thing, or both?

Annabelle Bowdry
Sunday was a really a busy day because there were different activities that we had on Sunday. They had Sunday school in the morning. Then we had the church service. After that was BTU. That lasted until about 4 or 5 o'clock. Unless they had a special evening concert or program. Then it would go later. Most of the things started at 3 o'clock. That's when you had your evening service.

Andrea Bowdry
There was the nurse's board. The deacon board. If the choirs had anything, choir's anniversary, the pastor's anniversary, our annual tea. We'd be in church all day.

Annabelle Bowdry
Services would last from 11 o'clock to about one 1:30 depending.

Andrea Bowdry
Then we would go down to have dinner. Then we would get ready for the afternoon service, which would start around 3 o'clock. We wouldn't be out till 5. And then sometimes we would be out a little later because my grandmother was part of the kitchen. She'd be in the kitchen cooking, and then sometimes we wouldn't get home until late.

Mary Lu Seidel
What was your grandmother's name?

Andrea Bowdry
Marjorie Minor

Mary Lu Seidel
Because I was talking to Patricia Hicks. Her mom was a was a kitchen worker, too. They must have just been cooking all day. Were you ever on the kitchen crew?

Andrea Bowdry
I was more on the kitchen crew, and my mom was involved a little bit. My thing was the choir and kitchen. That's where I served. I watched my grandmother with Miss McKinney. Barbara Theus. Theoda Williams. Geraldine Abdullah and her sister Leona. And those were just my days in the kitchen. You're talking about Patricia Hicks. Patricia's mother had passed by the time I got in the kitchen. That was the kitchen crew that I grew up with.

At Greater Union, we were some spoiled members when it came to food. We just had good cooks. Not everybody can cook, but I can tell you that all the people who came out of Greater Union could cook!

Mary Lu Seidel
Drea , were you ever involved with the girls auxiliary?

Andrea Bowdry
No, because by the time I came on board, it was no longer there. They didn't have it. They had it when my mom was coming up, but they didn't have it when I came.

Mary Lu Seidel
Was that the same thing with the shepherd boys?

Andrea Bowdry
The shepherd boys were still going on when I was a kid. Because Deac had taken over the shepherd boys. So, we had Freddy and Mark and Tony and Reggie and oh my gosh, Hakim. It was a whole bunch of them. That was when I was a little girl. Deac was over that at the time.

Mary Lu Seidel
Are you still in Chicago now? Are you still a member of Greater Union?

Annabelle Bowdry
We are still in Chicago. We are with another church, but we still have ties with Greater Union. If there's something going on, we still participate in the services. Before the pandemic, they were doing a sewing group with Sister McCray, and we would all come together and learn how to sew. So even though we're not there with the group, we are still a part of it.

Mary Lu Seidel
I wanted to get your thoughts on the building itself, because I walked in that church with my

mouth open. Wow.
Andrea, from your perspective, what was it like growing up as a child in Greater Union?

Andrea Bowdry
When we were little, we used to be involved in the Missionary Baptist youth conference. And a couple of times, when we got back, we had to stay over at the church. And not just for the conference, but for other things like our youth shut-ins we would be at the church. There would be little areas that we would run and hide, running around the sanctuary. We shouldn't have been doing that, but we did.

We used to go to the basement. Deac didn't like people in that basement. We weren't supposed to be down there unsupervised. But we'd go down in the basement because there used to be a foosball table down there. So, we'd be down there unsupervised and Deac would be yelling at us.
Us kids coming up, we didn't care for Deac too much. But as we got older, we understood why Deac was the way he was. Deac was a very structured deacon. He didn't play them type of games. He was a stern disciplinarian. And not just him. It was others like Gramps. I'm pretty sure you've heard about him, Deacon McKinney, Deacon Pendleton. That was another one. They did not play games. We got caught running and all that. Yeah, they got on us about that. We had a little fun running around and doing stuff we shouldn't have been doing. But I mean, we were kids.

Mary Lu Seidel
That's totally understandable. I would have found that place pretty magical if I was a kid growing up there. With the stainless windows and all the woodwork. I'm not sure what the church has done over the years to keep all that wood so beautifully rich. It's not dry, it's not cracking, it's not peeling. All of that woodwork in there is in stellar condition. It's really unbelievable.

Andrea Bowdry
It's a beautiful sanctuary. I think I mentioned that when they broke into the church, they broke some of the windows above the doors at the back of the pulpit. The stained glass above those doors is missing. They broke them out, and it cracked. We couldn't get those replaced.

Mary Lu Seidel
The stained-glass windows are really stunning. And the baptismal pool.

Andrea Bowdry
Did they tell you about the pool that's downstairs in the fellowship hall?

Mary Lu Seidel
That doesn't open at all, does it?

Andrea Bowdry
No, I wish they could open it and view it now. But it's downstairs. They won't ever probably open that back. But there's pictures of it.

Mary Lu Seidel
Maybe as part of the landmarking process, we can encourage them to open it up just to document it. And we could have a congregation event where everybody could come in and see it.

Andrea Bowdry
That'd be really great. I want to see it. When I saw that they had a baptismal pool in the Fellowship Hall? I was like, "Oh, does that open?" Nope.

Mary Lu Seidel
Andrea, how old were you when you were baptized?

Andrea Bowdry
Nine.

Mary Lu Seidel
Were you scared of the water?

Andrea Bowdry
I was freaked out because it's a submersion, so you go on under the water. It's not like Catholics. They take the water, and they sprinkle. You are going up under that water, and I remember mine was cold. That water was cold.

Mary Lu Seidel
Any other people or events that really stand out from and memories for you or of the church? Or your thoughts on the church being Landmarked – getting that Chicago Landmark designation and being recognized and protected for generations to come.

Annabelle Bowdry
I think it really should be because the structure. You just don't see buildings on the inside like that anymore. Everything is always so flat. You don't have those beams in the ceiling. They don't do buildings like that anymore. I really believe it should become a Landmark because it goes back for so many years.

Mary Lu Seidel
It's exciting. It will keep it from being demolished or significantly altered. Especially if the United Center has any plans to expand its operations. Even if the church ever did sell it, because of the Landmark designation, it couldn't be torn down. Once it's Landmarked, it will be safe.

Andrea Bowdry
I did a lot of singing. A lot of memories are anything that had to do with singing -- a lot of our anniversaries and concerts. Just how you can get people back to come together that you haven't seen in years. Anything that we did after church, people were always coming to some type of program. It didn't matter if it was like our annual tea, or if it was for the ushers, or the Deacon Board or the choir. Just to be able to fellowship with everyone after service, and to be able to eat after service. Because anytime we walked in Greater Union, and we smelled chicken? We knew that there was going to be some type of program. Because we knew we were going to eat at church. And you smell that bird, fried chicken.

Those are a lot of great memories. And I really do agree with my mom that this church and structure should become a Landmark because people have paved the way. So many things have been done at Greater Union, so many people have come through Greater Union, so many families, so many relationships have been built through Greater Union. We just look at us, like, we're just one big church family, even though a lot of us aren't there anymore. We know we can always come back and be able to help or assist. People have paved the way that have passed on. Big names through Greater Union have paved the way. Blood sweat and tears have come through this church.

When people have needed something, people have put their tithes into this facility to be able to keep Greater Union standing because it takes money to run anything. To have this protected, and to be able to say that I am a part and was a part. And I've played a role because this is what I've done. Or this is what I served on in ministry at this church that has stood all these years. It is a blessing to be able to say that. When you have a building that's been standing for all these years and then it's torn down? All you can say is “Greater Union used to be there.” But nobody knows what Greater Union is unless you show pictures or videos. But to have a building that's actually there and say that you've been you are part of this structure? Yeah. I believe that it needs to be there. Because people have come through, you know?

Interview with former parishioner Freddie Bogan. Conducted by Mary Lu Seidel of Preservation Chicago on October 10, 2022.

Mary Lu Seidel
Okay, so now I'll just ask you again. Freddie Bogan is how do you pronounce your last name?

Freddie Bogan
Oh, yes, Bo-Gann.

Mary Lu Seidel
Oh, can you confirm you're okay with this session being recorded? Yes. Okay. Thanks so much. Well, I wanted to you know, I was interviewing Andrea and Annabelle Bowdry this morning.

Freddie Bogan
Oh, wow.

Mary Lu Seidel
Andrea says, "Say hi to my brother Freddie."

Freddie Bogan
Yes, that's my sister!

Mary Lu Seidel
Everyone I have met at Greater Union Baptist Church are some of the most delightful people I've met. They're friendly, they're positive, they're faith filled. No pressure, you know, for your interview! We're collecting these stories for the Chicago Landmark nomination for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks as they're preparing to nominate Greater Union Baptist Church as a Chicago Landmark. These oral histories will help capture the stories of the people who have been members or who are members of Greater Union Baptist to recognize and acknowledge the names of different leaders and figures within the church that have been important to the congregation. We really want to include not just the history of the building and the architecture. That's easy. We have already done that. I just I wanted to get a sense of what point in your life did you come to Greater Union Baptist Church? And if you can talk about that a little bit.

Freddie Bogan
Okay, well, I'm 55 years old. Back in 1990, I was 10 years old back in 1977. And we would always see this church bus driving down the street and stopping in towards the end of the corner picking folks up, you know, picking folks up. So, one day, we just stopped the bus. Hey, can we go to church with you? And they said, Yeah, sure. They said to ask our parents. And they'd start picking us up. So, we asked our mom, and she was like yeah! It was Vacation Bible

School. And that's how we first started coming down for vacation bible school because of the bus ministry that they had dropping off one of our neighbors, you know, and it was a lot of us, initially started going to ask kids going down for vacation Bible school, and then we started going down on Sundays. So that's how I initially started going to Greater Union, which was, oh my god. We're talking 22-23 blocks from my home. We got on that bus as kids not knowing where we were going. We just knew we were going to church. And it was like 20 to 23 blocks away from home. And that's how it started.

Mary Lu Seidel
Did you go to church all day on Sundays? I know when I was talking to Drea and her mother, she talked about going into morning services and having bible school and then the afternoon service and…

Freddie Bogan
As a child initially we would go to Sunday school. At nine o'clock the adults would go upstairs for regular service. We had children's church down in the fellowship hall. It was church, but just for the children. And we will be down there. Every Sunday, except the first Sunday of the month that it was all combined church upstairs in the sanctuary. We would stay there all day. We would have BTU (Baptist Training Union). And then we would have six o'clock evening service. We always had Communion on the first Sunday in the evening. Baptism was in the evening. So yeah, we would do an all-day thing. And then Mondays, we will have a shepherd boys and girls auxiliary for the young people. And that's what they taught us how to run meetings. We had a President, the Secretary, the devotional leader, the Vice President, the Treasurer, and the young folks would run the meetings. We had the boys auxiliary for the boys. And the girls auxiliary for the girls. And they taught us how to run meetings, make motions, and all of those good things. The supervisor was an adult, of course, he will give us the Bible Lesson, meditation for 10-15 minutes. And then every now and then he would give us the opportunity to give a Bible lesson. So that was something that we learned throughout the week.

We could come down on Wednesdays for Bible study, with the evenings if we like. On Saturday, we would have youth fellowship with the boys and girls combined. We had a meeting and all type activities and those types of things. It was a lot going on at the church that kept us involved. And we wanted it. If you have something for the young people and it's exciting, they will come. And I've noticed that quite a few churches don't have that. What we had and what some churches today have, they don't have that for the young folks. And if you look around you, you don't see a lot of young folks in the church because they don't have things that keep them. And then there's so much that the churches are competing with our outside world for. But if you have these types of ministries, the young folks will come and kids draw kids because I promise you, it was quite a few of us from my neighborhood that was coming. And we would just draw more people just really telling them hey, come, come. Young folks draw young folks.

Mary Lu Seidel

Right. Were you baptized at Greater Union?

Freddie Bogan
I was baptized as a Greater Union; I started going when I was 9 years old back in 1976. I still got my baptism certificate. I keep all those things. I've been a keeper of stuff for years. I got baptized in 1979. So, I might have been 12 years old.

Mary Lu Seidel
I was talking to Drea about the fellowship hall baptismal font, was that there when you were baptized or up on the pulpit?

Freddie Bogan
Yeah, we were upstairs in the back of the sanctuary. When we started going, they had closed that down, that had been closed and sealed. I think they closed the seal in the early 1970s. But the crazy part about it, you can still see the marking in the floor. They had put new tile down. But over time, you can still see the mark. And when you look down at the floor, you can still see where it came up that you know you wasn't able to of course to pull it up, and the pool was still down there. They just closed it up and put tile on top. But you can still see the marking where that pool laid.

Mary Lu Seidel
Right. When I was there a few weeks ago, I saw that, and I'm fascinated by it. Drea and I were talking about whether we could see if the church would reopen it to take pictures of it for the for the Landmark documentation. And we could have any congregants who wanted to catch a peek of what it looks like.

Freddie Bogan
You know, and I promise you if they're able to do that, which I'm sure they probably can, I would love to be down there to see that. And I remember for years always I asked, do anybody got pictures of that? I always asked that. I don't know if they had any, but I never saw pictures of somebody getting baptized. How it actually looked, but they said it was cold water. It wasn't no heating the water like the new one upstairs in the sanctuary. You know, right? You could run that water overnight and then heat it up. It would be nice and warm.

Mary Lu Seidel
That reminds me. Drea said you are the keeper of all things about this church pictures, programs. Are you still in the Chicago area?

Freddie Bogan
I'm about six blocks from Chicago. I'm staying in Oak Park. Okay, so I got all of my dealings in Chicago. I go to church in Chicago. I work in Cicero, Illinois, which is right next to Chicago, and you know, on the north of Chicago, so yeah, I'm not far. You know, I'm right here.

Mary Lu Seidel
I wonder if the city needs any more historical photos or anything, would you be okay if I pass your information along to them? [Freddie agreed to that.] I mean, I've heard so much about the shepherd boys. Were you involved in any choirs?

Freddie Bogan
I sang in the choir. I still sing in the choir. And oh, my god Greater Union. I get emotional just talking about Greater Union. I mean, we were just taught so much. I still sing in the choir now. And I sing in a quartet group as a result of learning from singing in the Junior choir. When I started going down, I joined the junior choir, which for the young kids, little bitty kids, 8-12. After the junior choir, I joined the carol choir, which was the teenagers. Then I joined the chancel choir which was the adults. Before I started going Greater Union, they had like five choirs. I'm sure some of the older people was able to share with you but during my tenure there were three -- it was a junior choir and carol choir and the chancel choir. Whereas before my time they had oh my god inspirational choir, a gospel choir. They had like five choirs. And then we had the men's choir. And during my tenure, so at one time, I was the director of the men's choir. And I was the assistant director, under Andrea with the chancel choir -- the adults.

Mary Lu Seidel
Were you ever involved in any of the Kitchen food prepping?

Freddie Bogan
Oh, no, not involved with that, but you know Deacon Ray Brown, he was the custodian of the church for many, many years. And when he retired, I became the custodian. So, I was there as far as opening up the church and closing the church. I became the custodian in 1996. He retired for health reasons, but he was still able to come to church, so they made him a consultant. So, he would still come down here you know, during the day and consult and help. I was custodian from 1996 until 2004 or 2005. Then that's when I got the job with the post office and then that's when I turned it over to Spence, well I didn't turn it over to Spence, but I recommended Spence. You know, and not just me, but you know, other trustees and other members they saw Spence could pretty much be my replacement. You met Spence, correct?

Mary Lu Seidel
Yes. That's one of the things when I visited there. The church is just so beautiful. The sanctuary is like nothing I've ever seen in the country. There's nothing that quite compares to it. What was it like for you in your days at Greater Union to just be walking into such an extraordinary, hallowed place?

Freddie Bogan
Well as a kid you really didn't appreciate it as much as when you got older. So not as a kid you know, church was fun and learning. But as I got older, it really started looking around. I feel the

same way you felt like man this place is beautiful. Even in my new church now, and I am engaged, I say if and when I do get married, I want to go back to Greater Union and have the wedding at Greater Union. I agree because you are right. It is like "Oh my God!" It's beautiful.

Mary Lu Seidel
Everything is in such great shape there. All the woodwork. You know sometimes when you go into an older church that wood if it's not taken care of will dry and crack and peel a little bit, and I was looking up at the rafters at that church and I was thinking it is perfect. I don't see any flaws!

Freddie Bogan
We've had so many people ask, "How do you all keep the ceilings shine?" We like we don't do nothing it just stays like that. They actually thought we got up there somehow and kept them and polished those ceilings. We're like man we don't do anything to those ceilings. And Deacon Ray Brown was the supervisor of the shepherd boys and actually he was the bus driver the one that started picking us up when we started coming to church initially. Him and myself we went up above the ceiling. There is a way you can climb up in there but it's completely dark. We had a couple of spotlights and I walked only so far. I know you can't just walk on that you can walk on the planks or the beams and we walked so far up above the ceiling. It's a sight to see just being up there.

Mary Lu Seidel
I do think maybe because the ceiling is actually below the roof is what probably helps as well to keep that wood in such good shape because you don't have the direct hot and cold right from the roof. It gives you that gap.

Freddie Bogan
Right, there is a gap.

Mary Lu Seidel
When I first saw it, I thought "Man, they must have some big ladders to work and treat that wood and rub it with oil or something like that."

Freddie Bogan
You wouldn't be the first person to think that. A lot of people thought that we do that. We get up there and keep that polished, and we have never touched that.

Mary Lu Seidel
Everybody mentions Deacon Brown. You just called him Deac? Although Drea will say he was he was a rule enforcer.

Freddie Bogan

Oh, Deac. He wasn't no punk! I never knew my father. Whether you had a father or not, many of us considered Deac like a father and wished that he was our father. I mean, he came to my eighth-grade graduation. I loved him so much. I only received three tickets to my eighth-grade graduation. And I gave him one, and he was there. Deac was loved by many. And one thing about Deac? Deac didn't care who you were or what you were. A hooker, a gangbanger or whatever, when you came up in that church, you were going to be respected by all, and Deac made sure of it. We had Henry Horner Projects that have been torn down. Those gangbangers and all of those guys had the utmost respect for Deac. And this is a true story. A lot of them didn't even know the name of the church. They say we're going down to Deac's church. They call it Deac's church. He had so much respect from people. There were some people didn't like Deac. Just keepin' it real. But they respected Deac, because one thing they knew about Deac. He was going to tell it like it was. If you knew Deac, you knew where you stood with Deac. If you asked me to pick my top three, Deac would be number one. Deac would be number one. I mean, and like you say, you hear that name so much.

Deac died back in 2011 -- 80 years old. Oh, my God, I think about Deac now. I mean, to know him was to love him. But even if you didn't love him, you respected him. Deac just kept it real. And he respected everybody, and you were gonna respect him, too. And even the guys in the neighborhood, he will allow them to come. And one thing about being a shepherd boy, you didn't have to be a member in order to be a shepherd boy. And we had guys that didn't go to church, but they were shepherd boys. That was Deac's way of saying, "Hey, you are welcome. You don't have to be a member. We would love for you to join. But we're not going to let that stop you from becoming being a participant in the things that's going on here at the church." And when we were shepherd boys, we would take trips. Once a month Deac would allow us wherever we wanted to go we would go -- Marina City Bowling, skating, the museums. Once a month, we took a trip and the girls would go with us as well, the girls auxiliary, but yeah, Deac was a Godsend. I mean a Godsend. A lot of folks don't even know his full name – they just called him Deac.

Mary Lu Seidel
Was he there when you first came to the church in 76?

Freddie Bogan
He was the bus driver when we were asking "Hey, can we go to church with you all?"

Mary Lu Seidel
So how long was he at Greater Union? Do you know roughly when he started?

Freddie Bogan
Deac said he started going in 1953, if I'm not mistaken. One thing about Greater Union is they have all the records. Any member you call that name, they can go in the office, and they got the index card. They can tell you when they joined when they got baptized. It's all on the index

card.

Mary Lu Seidel
Do you still participate in special events at Greater Union?

Freddie Bogan
Oh, yeah, look, I'll drop in on Greater Union from time to time. I will go to my church service, and I'll drop in on their church service. If they got something going on and afternoon service, I'll drop in a lot of times.

You know, during October, this is one of the church's anniversaries. That was organized in 1908. And they moved into that church in 1928. So, what is this? 114 years. So, most of the time every two or three years they have homecoming anniversary service. A lot of the old members come, we have a concert reunion choir where we do a lot of former members and present members come and join and singing a lot of the older songs that we used to sing growing up. And so yeah, I still do participate as much as I possibly can.

Greater Union has instilled so much in me that I still feel a need to just do something special for them because they have done so much for me. And you know, you hear Deacon Ray Brown, but there were countless others. But Deac he was number one on everybody's list. And the crazy part about it. What Deac did for us? It instilled in us to do the same thing for others because Spence and myself and another brother Reverend Greg Herve. We started doing a lot of things

Easter Sunday at Greater Union Baptist Church in 1968. (Credit: congregation member Freddie Bogan)

with the young folks, we started a basketball team at the church. So, we were doing so much for the young guys that Deac was doing for the young guys. You know, he was a mentor to us, we in turn became a mentor to others, and telling them the same thing, hey, you go be a mentor to somebody else. It might not be 10, it may just be one. And I remember even Rev. Herve preached a sermon about the power of one, you think you try to say 10 to 100. If you can just influence one person and change their life for the better. You may never be thanked. But somewhere along the line, they're gonna look back at their life and be like, "Thank God for that person." And so many people can look back on their life and say: "I thank God for Deac."

Again, among others there were many at Greater Union. It was just so many ministries going on while we were young that kept us busy, kept us involved, and I'm sure they gave you a list of those ministries. So many. Even in youth conference, they would take us out of town. For Thanksgiving weekend. All the young people we will have church, classes, a concert. We would leave out early Thursday morning, Thanksgiving, and we will come back late Saturday, and they will tell us in order to go back again next year you had to be in church. There's no excuse that you wouldn't be at church, and we wanted to come so that was just even taking him and him taking us out of town. Oh, just so much. So much.

Freddie Bogan
I just want to just reiterate, as far as I know, Andrea, say I was more or less a history keeper at Greater Union. There are others, like Miss Adrian Thompson, she's even more equipped than I am. Now. I will say one reason Andrea said that, because I always had a camera. You know, before the cell phones. I kept the camera. So, I took pictures all the time. And then a lot of the old pictures. I would ask somebody, Hey, can I get your picture and make a copy? So, I got old pictures of the different choirs of the '40s and '50s. And pictures of the sanctuary how it looked back then. So, it was always somebody letting me borrow that picture to go make a copy and return it, but Adrian Thompson is one that really when it comes to pictures and those things has a lot of history, you know, oh, anniversary books, you know, back in the '40s and '50s and those types of things, you know.

Mary Lu Seidel
Is Adrian still a member of the church?

Freddie Bogan
Oh yes, I'm not sure if you interviewed her on not Adrian Thompson.

Mary Lu Seidel
Please let me know if you happen to be going through your pictures and you see anything that really captures the look of the sanctuary or the congregation and its glory or the choirs.

Freddie Bogan
I have those in black and white.

Mary Lu Seidel
Yeah. So, if you can scan them or I could come over come to you and scan them or whatever would work if you scan them and send them to me.

Freddie Bogan
I got a lot of old pictures. Whatever is good as far as us to meet, we'll do that.

Mary Lu Seidel
Yeah. Yeah, let me know if you find some. I'll ask the city. I don't know what Pastor McCray has provided to the city. But when I turn all my stuff into the city, I'll ask them as well if they need some more images and we can draw on you and Adrian.

Freddie Bogan
Okay, that sounds good to me.

Mary Lu Seidel
Well do you have any final thoughts on landmarking Greater Union Baptist and why it should be a landmark?

Freddie Bogan
I will say that Greater Union, before my time, it was a neighborhood church. Everybody that went there was staying in the neighborhood before the stadium bought a lot of those houses and torn down and made the parking lots and all of that. Everybody stayed in the neighborhood. But after that most of the people didn't stay in the neighborhood. You still had members that went there that didn't stay the neighborhood. But Greater Union was a place for those near and far, it was a good mixture. Even with some of the splits that happened, you know, you still had the fellowship continuing. Most of the people that left Greater Union, for whatever reason, still kept a connection because of the involvement that was done in their lives.

Just being a part of Greater Union, whether it was singing, so many people have come out of Greater Union, oh, my God, they can give you a list of singers, teachers, preachers. Oh, everything we did that we were able to take and use out in the world. Because everything that we were taught at Greater Union. The other good thing about it? It wasn't just one ministry that taught you that. I was a shepherd boy, and they taught me this, then I was in the youth fellowship, and they helped instill the same values, then BTU, and the children's church, then in the North Woods River District Association, then we had the mighty men. And then for the young ladies, the girls auxiliary, the YWA. It was just so many different ministries, so many different auxiliaries, that taught you and taught and, you know, just instilled it over and over and over.

And I really appreciated the fact that whatever was going on with any of the adults as far as they may not really agree with things? We never knew it as children. Now today, children know

who likes who, who don't get along. Those adults worked so well together because the ultimate goal was teaching us about Christ – to instill those very deep values in our lives. And even now, you know what I said, I couldn't do anything now because I had to go to do something for my godmother, she's still a member of Greater Union.

I have a love for two types of people -- young folks and older people. And a lot of the older people at Greater Union? I still got ties with them. One of them is Mary Thompson, that's my godmother. And I still go and do a lot for her. I'm constantly, you know, running her places or going to her house and doing those types of things. And that's something I've been doing throughout. She's another one that just really instilled so much in us that you know, the values and the teachings and the love, the tough love, I'm just all of that.

So, if I could just say anything else in ending, Greater Union has been a valuable part of not just my life, but so many people other lives and then the other thing is? I don't even know where I would be if there wasn't a Greater Union. I would end it on that. I don't know how my life would have turned out if it had not been for Greater Union. You know, growing up without a father, my mom had nine kids. Gang-infested, drug-infested neighborhood, but yet we had a place where we could go to escape all that and people would instill love in us. And even though they weren't our parents, they were our parents. And my mother didn't have a problem with that. You know? She did not have a problem with the tough love and all those things that people had to interject in us.

Mary Lu Seidel
Yeah, I think I heard that from everybody like it was just understood. Any grown up that was in sight of you could do discipline you.

Freddie Bogan
And the thing about that they didn't have to because we knew how to act. We knew it wasn't going down. We knew that we couldn't just act any type of way. We get out of hand from time to time, but for the most part they kept us in order. And you know today kids don't want to go to church. We wanted to be there. We would have church all day on Sunday. Monday was shepherd boys and girls auxiliary. I couldn't wait till Saturday to get back down there for youth fellowship. So, we'd be there Saturday, Sunday, Monday. I just couldn't wait. I mean, we wanted to be there. Wait till we get there. I mean, that's astonishing. A church where we just wanted to be there. Hmm, amazing. Amazing. Yes.

Mary Lu Seidel
I also interviewed Patricia Hicks. I don't know if you know her.

Freddie Bogan
Oh, yeah. She was choir director at one time. I love her. Oh, yes. She got married back in 1983. I was 13 years old. I was there at the wedding. Yes.

Mary Lu Seidel
She was saying that about the fellowship -- I've heard from everybody is that fellowship and camaraderie and sense of place and how you look forward to going to church every day and night.

Freddie Bogan
Wow. God bless you. And Patricia, here's her sister Barbara Thea. She, she was the supervisor of the girls auxiliary. She would be down there on Monday. She was one of our supervisors for youth fellowship, but she was the supervisor for the girls auxiliary. And she was the one that taught us about sitting down, having dinner and pass me this, and thank you, and you're welcome and all that. So, her sister was very instrumental. She was one of the supervisors that looked out over us as kids, you know, and Barbara Theas, her sister. She had a son, he's two years older than me. She would give me a lot of his hand me downs. We lived on hand me downs.

The cooks, over the years, we've been blessed with great cooks. Pat Hicks? Her mother, a great cook. Her sister, Barbara Theas, who was the supervisor of the girls auxiliary, a great cook. Greater Union has been blessed all the way around -- singers and cooks and teachers and preachers and just blessed. Pastor McCray. He used to be the pastor there from 1996 to like 2001 and he resigned he wanted to write a book.

Pastor McCray. I just tell him all the time, "You remember Harold Washington? You came in, and you opened it up." Sometimes, even in churches, it's the powers that be the more influential people that get those positions trustee, board and leadership position. Pastor McCray came in and opened it up with the lower classes for lack of a better word, the downtrodden, for lack of a better word. There was a mission on the trustee, board and all of those type of positions, and he just really opened it up. And so many people just love Pastor McCray. One thing I'd say is he is truly for the people.

I was in Cicero, Illinois. My license had been suspended. I was on my way to take the emissions test. And the police pulled me over. I'm just a block away to take my emissions test so I can get my license back, and they took me to jail. And he came. I called him, and he came and bailed me out for $200. He would do stuff outside of the church for you. Reverend McCray is a God-send. And it was just good to just know that he's back there. You know, just a great, great, we have a lot of great preachers that have come through Greater Union. You know, even in my new church. I've been there. I love it. But um, I just I don't know any other church that can compare to Greater Union. I mean with all the ministries that went on, you know, of course, they don't have to have that like it was as far as with us growing up. But it was just so much to offer that they were able to give and offer. And they dedicated non-paying jobs, but they just dedicated their life to make others better, and they did that.

Mary Lu Seidel
Yeah, I feel it and see it in every person I've talked to. You guys are really lucky.

Freddie Bogan
I can go down the list of plenty of names of the adults that was just there supervising and teaching and directing and preaching. All. Just so many, so many.

Mary Lu Seidel
That's amazing.

Freddie Bogan
Definitely a joy to be a part of that religious organization for all those years, 1977 to 2010. And even when I left, I was like, Man, I can't believe I'm gone. When I left the church in 2010, for the next few Sundays over the next couple of months I would leave my house on my way to my new church, but I would make that turn to go to Greater Union. And I would drive like two blocks and catch myself and then I know I'm going the wrong way. I don't go there anymore. I didn't burn a bridge when I left because when you burn a bridge, it's hard to cross back over that bridge. I can walk back into Greater Union. They're happy to see me. I'm happy to see them.

Mary Lu Seidel
Wonderful. It's a pretty special place for a lot of reasons.

Freddie Bogan
I still have cassette tapes. Every now and then I grab a cassette tape of the music or a regular service at Greater Union and just let it play. We used to do anthems. A lot of churches, you ask them about anthems. They don't know what an anthem is. We used to sing those anthems with the best of them. So many musicians, top musicians, have come through that church. Nas Schaefer who passed eight years ago, something like that maybe well known throughout Chicago.

And the thing about them that like now these musicians at these churches, they get paid $300 to $400 per Sunday or more. At Greater Union, for the musicians it wasn't about the money. That was their church and their ministry, and they were doing it for dirt cheap. Because they were like "This is my church. Why am I going to charge my church all this money. I got a job." And they're just peanuts to play for the church, and every musician that we've had, even now with Scott Thompson, they can read music. To be able to read music is a wonderful thing.

Mary Lu Seidel
All right. Well, I really thank you so much for your time today.

Freddie Bogan
I hate that this is ending because I've enjoyed talking about Greater Union. I still talk to ex

members and present members. And Greater Union is going to come up. We are going to talk about Greater Union. Some of the things we used to do. And why are we not there anymore.

Mary Lu Seidel
That's amazing. All right. Well, thanks so much. I'll keep in touch too. And if there are any pictures you find that you think would be worthwhile, I can come over and scan them.

Freddie Bogan
Okay, well, I will get with you real soon. We will definitely before this month is out, I will get with you and make sure I get those pictures to you. I have a lot of pictures of how the Sanctuary used to look. Some of the old choirs.

Mary Lu Seidel
That sounds great. Thank you so much for your time. Once again, I'm loving every single person I've met from Greater Union.

Freddie Bogan
Oh, wow. That's good to hear. Yeah. And believe you me we're just talking from the heart. Everything that has come out of our mouths is the unadulterated truth. Speaking from the heart. This is not make believe. This is all real. That's wonderful. Yes, man.

Interview with former parishioner Patricia Hicks. Conducted by Mary Lu Seidel of Preservation Chicago on October 6, 2022.

Mary Lu Seidel
Just for the record, I have your permission to record this, which we will be using to transcribe the meeting. And also, I've told Pastor McCray, we may use parts of the videos to create a promotional video for the church itself. The questions I'm going to ask you are how long you've been a part of the church, when how you came to the church? Do you still live in Chicago? [Yes.]. Your history and your time with the church? What the congregation means to you? You know, we're making the pitch for this building to be landmarked. So, the historic character of the church and how it feels to you and the church community worshiping in such a place like that.

Patricia Hicks
Like I tell everybody that has always asked me, Greater Union will always be my church home. My family was born and raised there. My mother was a cook in the kitchen. All we knew was church because as soon as she had us and brought us from the hospital, we were right to church, because she had to cook, you know. Growing up there was great. We had lots of friends. And it was just so many of us, lots of young people, lots of older people with knowledge that will teach us how to do. We had the best music department. We learned a lot. We had Sunday school, we had a Baptist Training Union, we had the GA (the girls auxiliary), we had the shepherd boys, that was for the boys. We had Girl Scouts, we had Boy Scouts. The education curriculum that we learned from the Bible was just out of this world, we had the best teachers.

And then everybody was Mom, everybody was Dad, or everybody was Uncle or Auntie, you know. Anybody could chastise and discipline us if we did wrong. Not in a mean way. Everybody was loving what they did. Mom had to go do something, she could always put us over here with sister so and so. So, we were in real good company. We grew up at Greater Union. We lived right across the street before they moved the stadium, the United Center now, right across the street. So, it was a lot of activity all the time. And then a lot of people that belonged to the church, before they relocated, that whole row housing on Washington or Warren, mostly all of those people belonged to Greater Union. So, we could go to their house after church, or if we had any activities during the week, we could always say "Oh, let's go over here or across the street and around the corner to mother so and so's house." Because everybody was like family. We were all family. It was just the greatest. I love it.

I guess I was there all my life. And then I got grown. My husband, he was an interim pastor there. At one time before he passed away. I was over the music department. It was really nice. In the teaching, we had the best teachers, like I said, we got the greatest teaching. We know the Bible almost from cover to cover. We did a lot of hymns in the music department, which I love hymns. I love all kinds of music. But the hymns were my favorite. We would sing a hymnbook almost from Hymn 1 to Hymn 565. We sang those hymns, and we understood the words. If it

had 12 verses, we were always singing all 12 verses. I was like, “Why do we have to sing 99 verses of one hymn?!?!” That's the way they taught us. If you're going to sing a hymn you might as well sing it all the way through. If it's got four verses, don't just sing verse one and then jump to verse four. You got to know what's in between.

It was just great. I just love the memories of the church. Still if they have anything to this day, I still try to go back and you know if they need me to help with anything, I go back to help. I always go visit. So, I'm looking forward to it coming back to where it used to be, because that's where my family is, that's where we were born and raised. That's where we grew up.

Mary Lu Seidel
I've heard about the girls auxiliary and the shepherd boys and the various levels of the choirs like the senior choir, the junior choir.

Patricia Hicks
Angelic choir, gospel chorus. I think at the time that I can remember from growing up the choirs stands, it was like, it was one, two on each side. It was like, in the middle, we might have fit two or three. And then it was one choir on the floor. So yeah, we had music all over the place. It was really nice. Yes, the Gospel choir. There was a junior choir, angelic choir, gospel choir, senior choir. We had four or five, back in the day. Yeah. It was like music for each, I would say like for each generation from the younger ones to the older one. And then it was a variety of music. You wouldn't just get all gospel, and you wouldn’t just get all spiritual. Everybody had music that equated to their generation. It was great. The musicians and the directors, they were just second to none. That's where I learned a lot of my musical abilities. I play a little bit, not as much as I used to. And then my husband, he was a musician also before he became a minister, and before he became the interim pastor. So yeah, we got music going, like all in me. Yeah, it was great.

Mary Lu Seidel
How long was your husband interim pastor at Greater Union?

Patricia Hicks
Somewhere between 2000 and 2004.

Mary Lu Seidel
Growing up there, Greater Union was your home. What was that space like to you? How did it feel to be in such an amazing place? What did that feel like for you growing up there?

Patricia Hicks
Exactly. And that's what we did. First of all, like you said about amazing, the windows in that church are just unbelievable. They're behind the pulpit. There's a set of stairs where you can go down and come up. Like I said, when we were smaller, we used to run up those backstairs like

it wasn't nothing. And then we used to run up the stairs that are at the back entrance where you go up and down to enter on each I go there now and I'm practically crawling up those stairs. I remember when we just used to go zoom, zoom, zoom, we would just be all over the place -- the classrooms, downstairs there was a basement. I think that's where the first men's washroom was. And it was kind of off limits to the girls.

There was a room on the side for the gentleman we used to call Deac. He was the janitor. He was the everything. Every time you went to church, Deac was there. He was the caretaker, but he was so great with the kids. He was over the shepherd boys. And I don't know if he was over the Boy Scouts, but he did a lot with our younger men, and he trained them. And to this day, all of my brothers came up under him. Every time you mention Greater Union, everybody, the first thing comes out of their mouth is Deac. His name was Deacon Ray Brown. He was the greatest. He was nice. And he chastised the girls too, but we knew when he said sit down, we had to sit down. It was nothing. No kind of mean. This was just out of love. He was just the greatest. He basically just took care of the church. Every time we went down, we would know Deac is going to be there so we could get in if we needed to do anything. He was there. So, he was he was a big part of Greater Union, of our coming up, and with the boys. But yeah, the running around like I say, I go down there today, and I look at those stairs. I'm like, I can't believe we ran up and down the stairs and now practically all of us might have to use canes and hold on to the rails.

Mary Lu Seidel
I did notice on one side they have a chairlift.

Patricia Hicks
Yeah, they have a chairlift. When we put that in, that was another big deal to help the seniors. It was like another accomplishment, you know, something that we've done, and it was great.

Mary Lu Seidel
I have heard a lot about Deac. Everybody speaks highly of him.

Patricia Hicks
He was the greatest. He was. He was everybody's dad.

Mary Lu Seidel
Did he have kids of his own?

Patricia Hicks
I really don't think he had children. I don't even think he was married. If I can recall, I think you'd have to ask some of the older people. Actually, he did have kids. All of us were his kids. He drove the van at the time when I was younger, he drove the station wagon. He would take us to McDonald's. And he would drive us to all of the youth on the march things we had on Satur-

days, I think it was like once a month, all the youth in the different churches in the area came together. And they were district meetings. I can't think of the name of the district meeting. But we would all get together young people. And if we were going, we could always either meet at the church and Deac will take us, or we could just go there. And he would always make sure that we got there and got home and everything. But yeah, Deac was all of our dads. I love Greater Union.

Mary Lu Seidel
In your youth, how many days of the week were you at Greater Union?

Patricia Hicks
I know we were there on Mondays because I think that's when the girls auxiliary and the shepherd boys met. It was at least three, maybe four days out of the week because when we got older when I was in the choir, choir rehearsal was on one day. I think it was Thursday. Wednesday night was prayer meeting. It might have been something every day of the week. The doors were almost never locked until everybody went home. When it was time to go home and go to bed.

Mary Lu Seidel
So, did you always recognize how special the building is? And I don't mean to focus on the building. Because, of course, a church is 99% the people in the faith and the leadership but it doesn't hurt when you walk into an extraordinarily beautiful place to worship. Did you always know it was a special place when you were a kid? Or when did you stop and realize this is really unusual?

Patricia Hicks
When I got baptized years and years and years ago, it was down in the lower level – there was a baptismal pool in the floor. Now the baptismal pool is upstairs in the sanctuary behind the pulpit. Being baptized in the fellowship hall baptismal pool was something that really amazed me. Because every time it was time to baptize, the deacons or the men would get these big hooks. And they would take these doors back, and they will open up, and it's like a big concrete hole that they will fill up with water. Then we will go down those couple of steps and that's where I got baptized. But over the years things progressed, and they built the baptismal pool upstairs. They just covered that up eventually, and we never used it anymore. But that really floored me when I was little that was that was so exciting, you know, to go down into the floor, you know, to get baptized. All the rooms that we had -- the kitchen, there was a room off the kitchen that was a Sunday school class. You have Sunday school classes in a row -- the nurseries, the beginners, the youth. The ushers had a room designated to them. There were just rooms everywhere. Then when you get upstairs, like you said this big, beautiful sanctuary with the benches that kind of like curved a little bit, you know it was just gorgeous. To think back on it, I grew up there. It just brings back memories and just chills thinking about how long the church has been there. I'm in my 50s. I was born and raised there. So, it is just something that I will never forget. I will never take anything away from being a member of Greater Union. I will always love my

church where I was born and raised.

That's another thing going back to Deac. We would have Bible drills. We stand in the line, the boys and the girls. And he would say something like, “Psalms 19:1.” We would have to have our hands on the Bible, and then we would go through and find Psalms 19:1. The first to step out and read it, Deac would say, “Okay, great job!” Then we would step back. I used to love those Bible drills, because we just flipped through the Bible. You would have to know. If you didn't know the Bible, you didn't know the New Testament from the Old Testament, you just be probably flipping all over the place. But, of course, they taught us the Old Testament had these many books, and the New Testament had these many in there. 66 books in the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, then he would go, “Okay, Matthew 5:10.” And we would have our hands ready on our bible, and we would start flipping and flipping. And we would have to step out and he would have to call our name to read it, you know, and so we were reading, he said, “Good job!” Oh, you are really bringing back memories now! That's a lot of the teaching we got. That was a great teaching, you know, to get us to know our Bible. We learned different songs, different quotes and everything. There was a song that said “Read your bible. Pray every day. And then you’ll grow, grow, grow.” That's when we were smaller, you know? And all of that's coming back to me now. If you didn't learn anything coming up at Greater Union, it’s because you didn't want to. It's not because you weren't being taught, because they taught us everything. They taught us etiquette.

As I got older, I was in the Sunday school class. I was an assistant Sunday school teacher. Miss Thompson was the Sunday school class teacher, and I was her assistant. If Sunday School started at 10, we all went in to start at 10. If my son was late, when he came in his job was to speak. When you're coming to a room when there's already people, it's your job to speak first. We taught the kids that when they step into a room and your people are already there, you speak. Common courtesy. I think I remember one time somebody came in late, and we all just turned and looked. And they were like, “What? Oh, yeah. Hi.” That's right. You came into the room, we're already here, so you speak to us first. You know, they taught us etiquette and manners. The biggest chunk of my learning in my life came from being at Greater Union. It was great. We were always bumping into friends.

These days, a lot of people don't go to church like we used to, and we don't do it like we used to anyway. Because we were in church all day. From Sunday school, then we took a break. And it was morning service, we took a break, there was an afternoon service, we took a break, there was BTU, we took a break, and there was a 7:30 service, which at this time, I'm thinking about it, it didn't bother me because I was used to it. That's what we did. But they don't do that in a lot of churches these days. A lot of churches, we just go to church in the morning, get out and it's over. Every now and then you will come across a church that has an afternoon or evening program. But there was always something to do. And somebody came or some church visited, and we fellowshipped with them, or we went over here to fellowship with somebody it was it was great.

Mary Lu Seidel
When you were there all day like that, did they provide meals?

Patricia Hicks
Yes. My mom was a cook back in the day when I was younger. She was one of the main cooks, and she cooked all the way up until she passed. And then after that, my sister took over. And there was this other lady that took over. There was always food. If there was something that we had to stay for or come back to, there was always food provided. If you wanted to stay, you can stay and eat. If you want to go and come back. Even if you want to go and come back, you can still eat. Because there was always plenty of food. We always ate.

Mary Lu Seidel
What was your mom's name?

Patricia Hicks
Her name was Helen Turner.

The Deacon Board of Greater Union Baptist Church in 1969. Top row: Rogers Hicks, Hollis Boggus, Rev. Loyd Pendleton, Clarence Bryant, Walter Powell. Middle row: Leo Day, (unknown), Wallace Pendleton, Isaac King, James McCurine. Bottom row: Thomas Owens, Leroy Canty, Sylvester Dickerson, Thomas Huddleston.

(Credit: congregation member Freddie Bogan)

Mary Lu Seidel
And what about your sister's name?

Patricia Hicks
My sister's name is Barbara Theus. I think you might have interviewed her. She's still there. There was a lady that she worked with her name was Theoda Williams. I remember Marjorie Minor. I remember Gertrude McKinney. She worked a lot with my mom. There were quite a few people in and out of the kitchen. Those are the names that just come right out of my head that I can think of. Once you get the records, you can view some of the names in there.

After all the years moving up in the kitchen. It was Theoda and my sister. They were in the kitchen. Because my mom's gone. Marjorie Minor? She's gone. Theoda. She's gone now. Even with the adults that were working, a lot of us young people we helped, too. If they cooked, if it was something special, if they decorated the table, they would always have the young people to come serve you.

Mary Lu Seidel
And still always you were learning how to be a proper greeter or proper server, right. That's something you don't get from church very often anymore.

Patricia Hicks
We took trips, we had picnics, oh we did everything. And every year at Thanksgiving there was the youth on the march when the young people got together on a Saturday. We would get together, and we would just be so excited because Thanksgiving was coming and depending on how far away, we had to travel we may leave after Thanksgiving dinner from our homes. And it will be on the weekend on Friday and Saturday. And we will come back that Saturday night. I'm trying to think today, do they still do it with the churches? It was just the churches. They were local. I think it was Chicago, Illinois, Michigan. And all of the youth came together for this one conference, and that was a good time to see all the people that you didn't see before, you met people from different states, and then you get to see them again the next year. We really looked forward to that travel. That was a big thing at the church. Even with all the fun, you still get your learning.

Mary Lu Seidel
What was the youth on the march? What was that program? It was with different churches?

Patricia Hicks
You would have to ask my godmother (Maudine Wordlaw). She knows everything. She's 85. She just celebrated her birthday. She lives in Indianapolis now. We went down there for her birthday party. If you ask her anything, she'll know the names. She'll know the time. She took us on a lot of trips. She helped out with the music department. Also, the Christian education de-

partment. They called it the Sunday school. Youth on a march. I'm trying to think of that. Was that everybody, or was that just local churches in the city? If you dig back into the records that'll pop up.

Mary Lu Seidel
Based on what I've heard from everybody, I feel like we need a couple of pages about Deac and your godmother as well. They were both people who were repeatedly mentioned by the people we have interviewed so far. How long was Deac a part of the church?

Patricia Hicks
Well, when I was born, he was there. And so, I'm trying to remember what year he passed away. Because I know at one time, he had gotten sick. And he was away from the church a long time. But then he came back. But like I said, when I was born, he was there.

Mary Lu Seidel
Well, if you think of anything else, you can shoot me an email or give me a call or whatever works best for you. We'll be keeping Pastor McCray updated, and he will be at the Landmark meetings when they happen. When the city plans to introduce it, once the report is written, it will go before the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, which is an appointed board, and then they look at it twice, usually two months in a row. And then it goes to a committee of the City Council and then it goes to the full City Council. So, once it makes it on the agenda for the Landmarks Commission. It could be approved within a couple of months. And Landmarking is a great honor.

Interview with former deacon and parishioner Maudine Wordlaw. Conducted by Mary Lu Seidel of Preservation Chicago on October 20, 2022.

Mary Lu Seidel
Your name came up many times with every person I've talked to. What I'm doing here is we're seeking oral histories about what this place has meant to the community and to the worshipers and to the people who served there. We love hearing about your memories of the place, the building itself, but especially, really by how much love and community and support I've heard coming from all the stories of people I've met so far.

Maudine Wordlaw
My dad was the clerk for the church, and I have his stuff here.

Mary Lu Seidel
What's your dad's name?

Maudine Wordlaw
My dad was Deacon James McCurine. I was born to him and my mom in 1937. I was born into Greater Union because my parents were there.

My dad and mom were from Clinton, Kentucky, and my dad's sister, Lena Evans, lived here in Chicago and was a member of what at that time was called Union Baptist. They were on Fulton Street. They were at 11 locations before coming to the present location, which was in 1928. My brother was born in Clinton. I was born here in Chicago. And they tell me when they would come on vacation to Chicago that they would always go to church there. My mother in Kentucky was a Presbyterian and moving to Chicago, the Presbyterian Church for blacks, African Americans, was on the far South Side, and she did not drive. So, she just started attending church with my dad at a Greater Union. When my family started attended, the church had already moved into the Damen and Warren building.

Mary Lu Seidel
About what year was that?

Maudine Wordlaw
My dad and them must have come probably in 1929.

Mary Lu Seidel
So, you were born into the church.

Maudine Wordlaw
Right. I was born into the church, and I just celebrated my 85th birthday. September the 28th, 1937 I was born. I've only belonged to two churches in my life – and that's Greater Union and

when I moved to Indianapolis in 1989. And I had already joined Life of the World prior because I commuted for nine years back and forth. And then after my mother died, well, Dad had already died. But after she died, my brother said, I don't know why you stay here because he had met the pastor at Light of the World, and I had already acknowledged my call to ministry, and I had been ordained. He says, I don't know why you stay here. Of course, when my mom was in a nursing home and she had gotten dementia, I did not want to leave her, nor did I want to relocate her from Chicago to here in her mental condition. That would have been very, very confusing. I've worked in health care centers in Chicago, so I knew what that kind of a thing would do. It wasn't until she died, and she died in 1987, then I joined Light of the World. She died in June and that September, I was here one weekend just worshiping and I decided before I come, I said this it, because I had already been to the church several times to preach for the women groups, and all. And then I decided that I would join, and I joined the church the second Sunday of September of 1987. And I've been here ever since. So that's why I said I've only belonged to two churches in my life. So, I grew up in Greater Union, from a baby all the way up, It's something to look back on all of that and see where in fact the McCurine family because my daddy's sisters, he had another older sister who was a member of the church and that was our church. And my dad had a lot to do with much of the things that happened in the church, even though he was just a deacon. But I was a Sunday school teacher, young Sunday school teacher, I guess I started teaching Sunday school at 15 years old. And I taught the junior department and then from there was moved to the young people's department which was the college-aged students. And then I also served as the director of the youth choir. And then it became the young adult choir. And because I am a Moody Bible Institute graduate, I also worked at Moody. At the same time, I was very much involved at Greater Union. I was as I said the choir director and also chaired the Christian Education Department. I was superintendent of Vacation Bible School for any number of years. I served on all the committees for anniversaries and banquets and luncheons. And not only that I even in the latter days, helped to cook in the kitchen. If we were going to have something if we were going to visit another church. One of the other young women and I we would go on Saturdays and get the food and cook it so that after church we can eat and then go on to fellowship at another church and all of those things.

Mary Lu Seidel
There I was really curious because I talked with Patricia Hicks . . . .

Maudine Wordlaw
Yeah, that’s my goddaughter. Her husband was one of the pastors.

Mary Lu Seidel
Right. I'm always fascinated about women in kitchens and what that whole culture is like and what that community was like, so I think was there a woman whose name was Theoda?

Maudine Wordlaw
Theoda Williams.

Mary Lu Seidel
And then Patricia's sister. Barbara Theuss. Both kitchen women.

Maudine Wordlaw
Those two grew up under me, because Pat Hicks and my daughter are the same age. Pat is going to be 63 next week, and then four days after that my daughter will be 63. Pat's mother and I were pregnant at the same time. And we raised those two girls up together in Gr,eater Union Baptist Church. Pat is a member of Freedom Baptist now. My daughter lives in Atlanta. She's a schoolteacher. They all talk about Greater Union because by both mothers being so involved and Pat's mother was one of the cooks in the kitchen back in the day.

Mary Lu Seidel
What was Pat's mom's name?

Maudine Wordlaw
Her mother's name was Helen Turner. Gerald Hicks, he grew up with his grandparents. His grandfather was one of the deacons of the church. And his grandmother, though, was just a very quiet woman in the church, but his grandfather was very, very involved. He and my dad worked together doing so many things together, you know, as deacons in the church. Gerald's mother and I were friends, but she died at a very, very, very young age. So, he kind of looked to me and became like a son. I never birthed a boy child. I just had my daughter. I did miscarry the first baby after marriage. And I say all the time that must have been my boy child, because then four years after that my daughter was born. We just became family. And Pat's mother always said whatever you plan for, Katrina plans for Pat. You can always go to it. They did a lot of things. And they still to this day. They're like sisters. But Pat, like I said, she is my goddaughter and Gerald is now deceased. I just talked to her a few days ago, we're back and forth on the phone all the time. I started them commuting to Indianapolis, in fact she was just here with her two sisters, Barbara Theuss and her other sister Pearl Rice (doublecheck spelling). All three of them were here for my birthday celebration two weeks ago.

Mary Lu Seidel
Wow. You're 85th

Maudine Wordlaw
My 85th birthday. Yes.

Mary Lu Seidel
What was your mother's name?

Maudine Wordlaw
My mother's name is the same as my first name – Maudine McCurine. I was named from my

mother.

Mary Lu Seidel
That's pretty unusual, isn't it?

Maudine Wordlaw
Yes, right. They always say that about a boy child that whatever the name Jr. But then some people at the church used to say to me Maudine Jr. I was named after my mom and no middle name. That's the name her mother gave her, and I have never really questioned it. My grandmother's name was Laura Vick. My grandfather was a deacon in the church, and he helped to build the baptistry that is in the lower level -- in that floor under what is now tile. That was the baptistry. It was in the floor. My grandfather helped to build that baptistry. His name was William Vick.

Mary Lu Seidel
Did he really? Do you happen to have any pictures of the baptistry?

Maudine Wordlaw
I don't. Because when we remodeled that lower level, that's when the major tile floor was put over that. Now I was baptized in that pool. What they would do was pull the doors on the floor, and they would pull those up and sit them up beside the wall.

Mary Lu Seidel
And I think Pat told me, the basement baptistry is really cold water. The one now behind the pulpit is nice and heated.

Maudine Wordlaw
Right. The new pool now it's up behind the pulpit. Right and all of the others above we were we were baptized downstairs, but my parents always told me I knew my grandfather well, because back in the day, you know, my mom and dad were working. And there were no daycare centers, and you know, and then I don't know about you know, but African American and you didn't they didn't just leave you with this one, that one or the other one. Oh, no, no, no. And so, when I started kindergarten and mom had gone back to work, and my grandfather would meet me at the elementary school and take me to their house. And they lived across the street but it's now the stadium. Well, the stadium always was there but in front of before what it is now right that was housing all down Warren Boulevard. And my grandmother and my grandfather lived in a big house right across the street. What is now a big major parking lot. My grandfather would take me there to the house, and then my dad would come, and he would pick me up and take me home. I was very, very close to my grandfather and grandmother. My grandmother couldn't read nor write. But I'm telling you she had a head on her body. She knew much and taught me much.

Mary Lu Seidel
Where were your grandparents from?

Maudine Wordlaw
My grandparents. Well, they lived in Clinton also, but I don't think that's where they were born. I don't recall where grandpa and grandma were born. Because all I know is Clinton, Kentucky. And then I know my grandfather had a brother down there. And then one of his brothers married my daddy's sister and they were there in Chicago. And that Uncle we called him Uncle Vick. His name was Jarman. He was the custodian at the church way back in the day. His wife was Rose Vick, and that was my father's sister.

Lena Evans was my father's sister, and Rose Vick was my father's sister. And not only was Jarman my father's sister's husband, but he was my grandfather's brother.

Mary Lu Seidel
Wait, say that again?

Maudine Wordlaw
Jarman Vick was my grandfather Will Vick's brother. Lena Evans, who was Lena McCurine, was my father's sister. And then their sister was Rose McCurine Vick, and her husband Jarman Vick was my grandfather Will Vick's brother.

Mary Lu Seidel
Wow, okay. I got it now. I had to draw a family tree here.

Maudine Wordlaw
All of them came. I don't know if anybody told you about L.W. McCurine who had been one of the superintendents of Sunday school. Morehouse graduate man, and that was my dad's youngest brother.

My family, as I've said, was just very, very, very involved in Greater Union. When they left Clifton and came to Chicago, they went to what was first Union Baptist Church. And then once they moved to Damen and Warren. Now many people don't say it, but I was told that when Lena was at Union, and when they were moving from Fulton Street to where they are at Damen and Warren, she said God had been good to the church and the name needs to be changed – not just Union but Greater Union. Now in our histories, I don't see those words written like that, but I just heard that story from when I was a child, hearing my dad and mom and him talk about that. And L.W. McCurine, who was the younger brother to my dad, Lena and Rose, he was a Morehouse graduate. He did serve as superintendent briefly at the church. And he did just a lot of other things before leaving, because then he moved around various places. To my knowledge, he never lived in Atlanta, but that's where he went to school.

And then my dad's other brother was George McCurine, I don't know if they said anything about the First Aid Nurses board or organization. His wife, Rose, was one of the latter presidents of that.

We were just a big family, but I know one thing we were a church family. And had major roles because my mother, Maudine McCurine, was the president of the missionary women of the church.

Mary Lu Seidel
What kind of programs did they do? Because I've heard a lot about different programs at the church through people, I've interviewed one-on-one who are in their 50s or 60s and they came up as kids, but I haven't heard about the missionary women's group.

Maudine Wordlaw
The missionary women's group, they went about helping the poor, you know, they would give things. We didn't have the things that they have today. But they went about helping the poor and were very much a part of the denomination's state convention as well as the national convention. And the missionary group they were divided in what they call circles. And they had five different circles. And the circles were usually the mission circles, and usually they were by the area where a person lives. When that circle met, they didn't have to travel to the church. And then once a month, all the circles came to the church and met. And they would have Bible study. They'd have prayer meetings. If we were having a revival, they would go out on the street corner and invite people off the corner to come into the revival meeting that night and they would want people to come. They were just very involved in the community. Far different than what is today because today you're almost afraid to walk out in the community where they'd go outdoor-to-door, or people could come to the church and if they needed help, they would try to give them help. It wasn't always money they needed. But whatever they could give if they could put food together to give to the people or whatever. They had two big events every year. Boy those women could dress up in those long, beautiful dresses. They had what was called the yuletide tea every year in December. It was just really a fellowship. They would have a little program. People would sing, people would give. We had a lot of women who studied poetry and they could recite that you know, they didn't read it, they recited it. But it would be a more fellowship opportunity for women, not just for the women, but it was open for the church because they would usually have 12 tables, one for each month.

Will Vick was one of the Deacons of the church in the early, early days. My grandmother, his wife, was Laura Vick.

Mary Lu Seidel
Jarman was a former custodian. I'm trying to piece this together how this all flows. Deacon Ray Brown, did he become the custodian after Jarman?

Maudine Wordlaw
Ray Brown wasn't even around when my Uncle Vick was deacon. He came way after Uncle Vick had been dead.

Mary Lu Seidel
Right and then he was a deacon and then Freddy Bogan became custodian.

Maudine Wordlaw
Freddie was a boy that grew up in a church Yeah, and then he became the custodian after Ray Brown, and now Spence is the custodian.

Mary Lu Seidel
I've traced the custodians all the way back to Ray Brown, but I wonder who filled in the spaces between Jarman and Ray Brown?

Maudine Wordlaw
There was another man that served, and I think he served right along the same time as my uncle did. His name was Mr. Farmer. I can't remember his first name. When you think of the custodians in a church today and all the work that they do, back in that day, they had to shovel the coal into the furnace. The furnace was down in the basement then. In the corner of what we call the fellowship hall. Now they have rooms back across that back part of that fellowship hall. They have some classrooms. Way before that, the furnace set in the corner back there. And Mr. Farmer, and my Uncle Vick, would sit back there so if they needed to fill another thing of coal. Lord have mercy. That makes me laugh. Because I was a child, but I can remember seeing them sitting back there. In the winter, the sanctuary was too large to be up there, and they had no furnace to throw heat off. So, we had church downstairs in the fellowship hall, and they would have it set up on a Sunday morning for church. The choir up on the stage area, the pulpit in the center, and the preacher sat over to the left side of that, and we have church downstairs because it was too cold in December in January. It was too cold to be up there. So, we'd have church downstairs, Sunday school, downstairs, everything downstairs until at least March.

Mary Lu Seidel
Right? So, there was no furnace in the sanctuary?

Maudine Wordlaw
No. Nothing to throw enough heat up there for that. I recall when the new things were put in where we had a furnace, and we were able to give air upstairs as well as heat. But because that sanctuary has such a high Gothic ceiling, even when we got the furnace, we still many times had to have church downtowns in December, January, and February. It was too expensive to try to heat the sanctuary.

Mary Lu Seidel

Right? I mean, that sanctuary is so stunning. As somebody who is someone who was born there, at what point did you realize this is a really remarkable space?

Maudine Wordlaw
Well, one thing is, I shared that with my daughter a few weeks ago. I've been divorced since 1963 or 1964. But my wedding was on October 8, 1959. You see those kind of candle things around that sanctuary? My cousins and family cleaned all those candles off and lit them. They were able to put up candles to light those. And I had a twilight wedding in 1959. I was telling my daughter the other week, I said, "Katrina, those things ain't never been lit since." She said, "I know." She too was born in that house. She was -- we don't call it a christening -- but she was dedicated at the altar as a baby. They probably could be lit again. I don't recall how my cousins cleaned them, and I don't even know what they cleaned them with. No telling what equipment and stuff they used. I mean it was something.

Mary Lu Seidel
One thing I talked to Spence about and that's what I talked to Freddy about was, how extraordinary the ceiling is in that sanctuary and that wood. It's like the Lord is definitely blessing you guys. Freddy said they never clean that stuff. They never polish it or oil. It just stays like that.

Maudine Wordlaw
Well, they did clean the ceilings. One year we entertained what was part of our denomination - it's called the National Baptist Sunday School Congress, where churches in the denomination come from all over the country for that. But we were the host church because in those days, you know, you couldn't go to the Hilton or the hotels, not as Black folks. We had to stay in people's homes. But we were the host church, so we did decorate the sanctuary. They painted it and had all that cleaning and everything because people were coming, and the sanctuary was the place for the major events when all the groups were together. And then downstairs in the fellowship hall, that was really like the dining room where people could sit and eat, have a meal. My father had a counter set up, and he sold ice cream for people to have for dessert. I recall coming from school and daddy telling me to get that money and help us sell the ice cream. I remember coming from high school to church. Oh, we were so excited about having that.

Another year we had the Midwest Baptist Youth Conference which is a Thanksgiving weekend event. In fact, this year they are celebrating 50 years, and this was made up of youth from churches in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Tennessee. They had just built Malcolm X Junior College, so we had many of the major events that weekend over there. But the church was the host, so we did have set ups there. The church has always been involved. Speaking of the women missionary group, during Christmastime they gave baskets to families back in that day. There would be food, maybe toys.

Mary Lu Seidel
Pat mentioned the Thanksgiving weekend the Midwest Baptist Youth Conference. She said that

was a glorious time for her in her childhood. She said every time she got to reconnect with all these youth from around the Midwest and see old and new friends

Maudine Wordlaw
I ran a chartered bus from Chicago every year, and the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church out on the South Side ran a bus as well. Most times the people on our bus were people from the West Side churches who were youth involved in that, and we left from Greater Union. That's the other thing. I've been a person who operates charter buses. If we were going to Nashville for the conference, we left Thanksgiving night. But if we were going closer, like to Indianapolis or we were going to Louisville, Kentucky, or some of those places, we would leave like at 5am on Friday morning because we were closer. But if we were going to Nashville, then we left at midnight the night before so we could get into Nashville early the next morning because the sessions would always begin at 10. And you would already have sent all of the delegates, so they had your name and all of that to give you a name tag and badge and all those things. And we stayed in the hotels, and never did I have a problem with not one of our youth because we would gather in that fellowship hall there at Greater Union. And I would say, "Now let me tell you all one thing. Anybody that is carrying on anything other than attending this conference, then your momma and daddy are gonna have to come get you because I'm going to put you on the next bus leaving and you will be coming back." And I said, "You're not making no babies in the hotel room." And I must confess, not one girl or boy who became a young woman or man in that church did that happen to. Some of them are telling me now, "What did you tell us Maudine? We weren't going to make babies." We were going to the Midwest youth conference where we were learning. The whole premise of that conference was to train young men and young women. One of the founding pastors who started that said we were making gap men and gap women for the church.

Then there were the women of us who were like chaperones or what they call us supervisors. And that's how Pat and my daughter they grew up in that, so she could tell you what she did, because her sister Barbara Theuss and I helped to operate out of Greater Union. And Barbara Theuss at that time was one of the supervisors of one of the youth groups in Greater Union. And then our youth choir many times would go to sing at the conference, when we would get there, they would have already been on the program. And I served as the adult supervisor of the whole conference. I served in that position for about three years. You had a youth person who was the President, but then you had an adult supervisor who was over that person and then the Vice President, then you had another adult, so we had hands on training for each one of them. Then there was Reverend Elmore from Louisville, Kentucky who was really the founder and organizer of the Midwest Baptist Youth Conference. He's deceased now, but he was a powerhouse. His whole thing was to make gap men and gap women for the church. In other words, we would stand in the gap.

His church in Louisville and another church Ebenezer church in Louisville. Oh, I mean, so many, you know, in those places, it really was a great fellowship because you met people that you maybe would have not ever known. And three women I've met way back then who are now

in Senior Living Centers here in Indianapolis now. And they said, “Maudine, you remember when we would to go to the conference?” But still when we gathered, we were all on one bus.

Mary Lu Seidel
I mean, the thing is, is every person I have met at Greater Union Baptist or who was ever been at Greater Union Baptist is faith-filled and beautiful and community-oriented. And it's really a beautiful thing to witness. I am honored to make all of your acquaintances.

Maudine Wordlaw
Well, I worked for the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul for years I loved the Daughters. I was the first black person who worked there. I started when I was in eighth grade, but I was the first black person on staff. And Marillac House there on Jackson and California and the Daughters of Charity. In fact, my hospital here is the St Vincent's Hospital, and the Daughters -- they don't have the nuns now -- but they still carry on the Roman Catholicism thing of having prayers every morning at 8:30. And prayers at 8:30 p.m. at night.

Mary Lu Seidel
Do you have any parting thoughts in support of Greater Union Baptist becoming a Chicago Landmark?

Maudine Wordlaw
I feel it should become a Chicago Landmark because where it sits at the corner of Damen and Warren Boulevard -- right across from what we knew back in the day as the Chicago Stadium, which is today, the United Center. Many of our members lived across the street, down Warren Boulevard both down from the church all the way as well as across from the church. My own grandfather lived in a huge building there across the street from the church. But then for the history and the community service that Greater Union always gave and still could do to the community. I feel it should be a historic landmark, the building itself with those gorgeous windows. Plus, the Gothic sanctuary, it should definitely be a part of the history of Chicago. Especially when you talk about the West Side of Chicago. I am grateful that I was born on the West Side of Chicago at home. When I look at the history and think of the history of this great church, I'm just grateful that that was my training ground, because I am who I am today first, as a born-again Christian, second as an ordained minister of the gospel, and third as a Christian parent and grandparent and great grandparents. I am grateful for my roots being in Greater Union Baptist Church.

Mary Lu Seidel
I had a question for you about when the United Center was built and all those houses came down, is that when the Greater Union membership started to decline, or had that already started happening before the United Center came in?

Maudine Wordlaw

I really think it had already started to happen, because a lot of the people who lived there back in the early days had already moved into new houses. Some had gone to the South Side, no one bought newer and finer houses architecturally wise than they had by Greater Union. Some had moved west, to the west suburbs, or further west because myself I lived in the 4500 block of Wilcox. I sold that property, and then I moved to Forest Park, and from Forest Park back into Oak Park and then from Oak Park I moved Indianapolis. But many people had begun moving and upgrading themselves.

When Jackie Robinson came into the National League, I'll never forget because when they came to play the Cubs, my mother and I was sitting out there every time. I was a teenage girl, but we went to the game every time he came to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

My brother played in the Negro Leagues with the Chicago American Giants. So that's history. Again, he grew up in Greater Union, too, but he was 16 years old when I was born. Because his daughter is just three years younger than me. His name is James McCurine, Jr.

Interview with parishioners Darryl Williams, Deacon Fred McKinney, and Darcea Gamble. Pastor Dr. Walter A. McCray joined for the last part of the interview. Conducted by Mary Lu Seidel of Preservation Chicago on September 13, 2022.

Mary Lu Seidel
So, if why don't we start with Darcea? How you came to be at Greater Union Baptist Church. What led you here the first time? Maybe some stories about the first time you walked in the door. It's hard for people to come into a new church in some cases. So maybe you could tell me your story of what led you from Roman Catholic Church to Greater union Baptist Church permanent?

Darcea Gamble
Well, one of my neighbors was a member here. And we were friends. We grew up together. And periodically, my mom would allow me to come and visit her here at the church. So, I would come, but I had to go to Mass first. And then I was able to come here. And the first few times when I came, it was like the experience that you said you had, it's like, wow, they're lively. They're free, you know, coming from a Roman Catholic Church where you sat very prim and proper, and you had repetitive greetings and repetitive things said in the church. Where here you came, and you just felt the warmth and the acceptance when I got here. I wasn't able to join when I was younger, because I was still under my mother's rulings of her house. But when I was able to make that choice, I knew I wanted to come here. So, I came and visited a couple of times, just to make sure that this is where the Lord was leading me and praying about it. I was in my 20s, and I decided that this is where I wanted to be. And I've learned a lot since I've been here.

Mary Lu Seidel
Did you grow up in this neighborhood?

Darcea Gamble
I did not. I grew up outside of the Loop area in public housing. I would take the bus here every morning before I was able to get a car and drive. That was the incentive because I knew I was going to come here and learn. I did learn some things from the Catholic Church because we went to catechism classes every week and Mass every week. But I really got deep into the church -- into the Bible -- and learned a lot of scriptures and songs and things here. Even in the Roman Catholic Church, I was in the choir. My godmother was in choir. And she was the cook for the nuns. So, I got a lot of experience there. But it was a different feeling when I came here. And so, I said I wanted to join, and I have not looked back. I did leave for a while. A little break that I took when I went to another church. But I came back. The Lord drew me back here. And this is where I'll be until he tells me to go someplace else. I love this church. I don't know much of the history of the church because I was not raised from infancy in this church. But what I have seen, I love. I love all the people here. Like I said before, this is my father in Christ [reaches out to Fred]. That's my brother in Christ [reaches out to Darryl]. So, we get along, and

I just rush down here when I know the church doors are open.

Deacon Fred McKinney
On that phrase, "God works in mysterious ways." It's true with me. I don't know how far I can go back. When I was young, I had you heard of G men, right? Well, I had G mothers, godmother, grandmother. Between the two of them, they kept me in church. And my thing was when I got big enough, I'm never going to church again. And God laughed. The young lady that I married. Her dad was a deacon here at this church. And her mother was on the mother's board. And it hadn't dawned on me yet just what was happening here. But I fell in love with this young lady. And she didn't like me. She said I talked too much. And I heard Okay, for that. I'm going to marry you. She said, "when hell freezes over." Those were her words. And cut to the chase to make a long story short, we got married. And she started going back to church. And it was a while before I came here. But I see the way she was acting after she came back from church. I'm wondering what's going on. So, I started coming. I fell in love with the people. You know, and I'm a deacon. I'm a Sunday school teacher. I'm a treasurer. And I'm 88. And I sometimes I look back and she looks back at me. And I'm wondering, "Did you guys set me up to be here? But here I am, and I am enjoying it.

Darryl Williams
I am actually different in that my scenario is that I was born and raised here. I can count back and say that I'm the fifth generation of family that has attended and still has membership here at Greater Union. It started with my great grandfather, who was one of the associate pastors. Then his son and my mother's mother -- this is where they met. They both attended here at Greater Union. And so that story went on. And then here comes my mother. She was born and raised here. She has three brothers that were born and raised here as well. And then my mother, there were six of us. And all six of us were born and raised here. So, we have a long history of Alexanders, even though I'm a Williams.

This place, I would tell people, this was my first home. When I grew up here, there were groups of all ages. We had from the nursery department. That's where I started at, to the primary, the junior department, the teens, which are high school students, and then the young adults. And after the young adults, you were just considered one of the older people. But in all those age groups, there were a number of kids and coming up, and I can say it was better than going to school. Here we were given structure, guidance, and truly discipline. But we learned. We learned how to function as an organization, but most importantly of all, we were taught the Bible. And in that I became a member whereby I joined the church at around the age of nine. I confessed and accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and was baptized. It was a place of fun and a teaching institution because this place along with my upbringing from my parents, I can truly say that it has made me the person that I am today. And that is that I truly know who I am. I truly know my purpose in life as a man, a son of God, that I am to serve his people and attend to their needs as Jesus did. Now, I may not be able to speak the word as eloquently as someone else, but I am a soldier in this fight. And this place had the biggest part in bringing me to that realization of who I am.

The Ladies Choir at Greater Union Baptist Church around 1960. (Credit: congregation member Freddie Bogan)

Mary Lu Seidel
That's beautiful. Yesterday, I learned a lot about some of the different groups here, the girls auxiliary and the shepherd boys and the different choirs and Darryl this morning going over the different choirs and how they sat from left to right across the pulpit. Are there any particular milestones you celebrated here are memories of your time here, with different pastors and different times throughout any amount of time that you'd like to share?

Darcea Gamble
Well, there's been quite a few moments that I have enjoyed. Here in the choir, and I am a Sunday school teacher as well. And I love working with kids. But what I like the most is that we are taught the Word in this house. I read the Bibles. I had missals when I was growing up, and we had family bibles. But it was like, "Oh, you don't touch that. That's that's, you know, that's just put out there. And that's holy, you don't touch it." The missals we were able to read, but it wasn't the full Bible. So, I still get a glimpse of what Scripture says. But when I came here, I got the full understanding. But Scripture says that you have to study to show yourself approved. So, I

started reading and dwelling and digging into the Word. Every day. To this day, I'm still growing, I'm still learning.

But it was when we would go out and visit other churches. The discipline that we were taught here was shown when we went out to other places, you can see the difference of how other churches were raising their young people. We get accolades all the time about how disciplined we were, how we were in the Word. You mentioned the Shepherd Boys. Deacon Drown used to have Bible drills that he would teach us what was for the boys, but we learned as well. And I was in the YWA – Young Women's Auxiliary. And they taught us there. then you have BTU that was in the evening. So, you were here from nine o'clock in the morning until about eight or nine o'clock at night. You would have a little break where you can go and have lunch or whatever, but you rush back to come back so you got to go to BTU, and you learn -- that was Baptist Training Union. And that's what you did. You learn and it taught us. Now when I got baptized, because as a Catholic I just got sprinkled, but I had to reach that tub, that pool. It took a lot of nerve, but I just felt rejoiced when I did it. That was the ultimate for me when I was here.

Deacon Fred McKinney
I've always been a reader. I love to read, and one thing about Greater Union is that if you're here and if you go and apply yourself here, this is an educational institution. They had everything here for you to learn. There's no excuse for you not learning. And what I liked most about that is that wherever they went, Greater Union was known for organization that had been drilled in them. I was 37 when I came here. I had bypassed all that. But now what really connected me with Greater Union is two things. I was the treasurer. And how I got that job that Reverend Morgan. He came here maybe about a year or two after I joined. He called me in the office. And he said, "Brother McKinney, how do you treat your money at the house?" And you know, I'm wondering now I'm getting set up here for something. I'm 37 years old, you know, talking about money. I'm wondering, is he going to get on me for not giving enough or what. So, he said, "How do you pay your bills?" I said, "Well, I don't have any problem paying my bills." And I said, "I don't believe in spending money because I got money to spend." He said, "Well, we need a treasurer. And you don't have to make up your mind now, but how would you like to be the treasurer temporarily?"

Darryl Williams
That was a set up!

Deacon Fred McKinney
I didn't know! There were so many people here then. I mean, we had deacons all the way across the choir stand, pulpit. So, I'm thinking if I had said yes to this man now when I leave here, I'm wondering what's going to happen. But as I got involved in, well, I'm still a treasurer. This was back in the '70s. I see another power of Greater Union. They were a tithing church. You know, I mean, when you said tithe beats the [indistinguishable]? That's what they took seriously! And so, I'm still here. I'm still in charge of money going in and coming out.

Darryl Williams
Well, I can say that when I really started paying attention to things at church was around the time, I guess I was about eight. Because prior to then, like I said before, there were a number of children in each age group. And we just had fun. I mean, it was exciting to come to church, because we knew we were going to have fun. And it was safe here. Everyone's parents had a hand in raising each child that have come through these doors. And what I mean by raising, I mean you receive love. You were disciplined, of course, but most importantly of all, they took interest in making sure that we were safe, that we were taught, and that we truly felt like this was your home.

It was Reverend Graham, under his pastoral service, when I was baptized. We had an associate pastor, Reverend Boggs (spelling?). At the time, it was Deacon Miller. Those two men they were about the same height, but I was a little short myself. I got baptized downstairs. And the pool downstairs is actually in the ground. And so, there's these big doors, almost the size of a one-car garage door. There was two of them, and they opened up and folded over flat on the floor. And in the pool, it will look like I would say not copper, but maybe steel some material, that it wasn't really steel, I want to say copper, but because of the water, it turned silver in color. And if you look down in it, you can somewhat see the bottom, but it was dark. I remember that. And there are stairs that would be lead down. And then before you hit the bottom, there was a platform, then add one more step down, you're at the bottom. But, of course, with my height I went down maybe two or three steps. I was standing there in that cold water, and it was a cold! I thought they would at least have enough sense to warm this water up. But no. They told me, "You're fine. You're fine." I'm standing there shaking, and they are saying "This water is fine."

When they baptized me, they dipped me into water, and brought me up. That was a time I didn't know no better. But that was a time that my life was going to change. Because after that I was given other duties and responsibilities. I wanted to go back and play. I want to have fun. The way I was brought in when I came in. And I all I know is being hugged, kissed, asked, "How are you doing?" And then after that baptism, I had to have duties. So, it was exciting at that time because everyone went through it. So, it wasn't as if it was something new. And when you became baptized, there are the various organizations per age group. I was a shepherd boy and I think I had secretarial position at one point. Chaplain at one point in the shepherd boys, but in growing up here it was expected that each one of us as kids and growing up here. These were the things you're going to do. It wasn't as if it was a burden. We were kind of excited. I know I was when my turn came for my responsibility. I even got mad one time that I didn't make the president of the shepherd boys. Oh, like I've been here all these years. I've got rank. I should be made president. But it was enjoyable.

Deacon Fred McKinney
I know quite a bit about shepherd boys inside and outside. So, tell us a little bit about the shepherd boys. I never did ever get a chance to get into the basics of what Deacon Brown's theory

would as far as that was concerned.

Darryl Williams
Well, first of all, as I stated earlier, all adults had a hand in raising each child and coming through. There was no bickering from another parent saying, "You can't speak to my child." That attitude was nowhere to be found. Deacon Ray Brown he was everyone's father. The shepherd boys were set up so that as a boy you would learn – how does the Scripture go? As a child, I will speak as a child.

Deacon Fred McKinney
Deacon Brown's position was to train you up to a point. And then you graduated.

Darryl Williams
That was the structure of the shepherd boys. He took young men, as boys, and through our lessons, through the structure in which everyone was given a responsibility, you learned how an organization functions, you learned finance, you learned the ministerial ways of the church. And you were taught the Bible. And in that, I'd say that I would be able to now, or even when I was younger, be able to go into any board meeting and operate within that meeting. As if someone went to school, but our school, and our learning and our teaching, our nurturing how we were taught here, I am able to function in the world without a problem. And that was the gist of the shepherd boys.

Darcea Gamble
About Deacon Ray Brown. You have to understand he didn't have any children of his own. But every boy, and actually girls too, but mostly the boys. They grew up in this neighborhood. If they didn't respect anybody else, they respected Deacon Brown. And we just call Deac. So, everybody knew Deac, and if you came through or pass by or anything in this church, and Deac was here, he taught you, he loved you, he disciplined you, and you agreed with it. There was no going "I'm going to tell my mother or whatever, that he did this." Oh, absolutely. He didn't care. "Bring your mom here, and I'll explain it to her." He had the love of a father for everybody in this community. Everybody here had the utmost respect for Deacon Ray Brown. And he was sorely missed when he passed away.

Mary Lu Seidel
How long was he here? Do you know?

Darcea Gamble
Ages. I think he was 70 something.

Darryl Williams
He was here when I was born. I have older cousins still around 75. So, I would say mid to late '50s. Somewhere around there. Maybe early '60s. Because actually Deac was the one who or-

ganized and formed the shepherd boys.

Darcea Gamble
I believe he passed in the '90s if I'm not mistaken.

Deacon Fred McKinney
I was working for the county corrections. 18 years as an officer, and 8 as a sergeant. Making my rounds. I even told Deac this. They knew that I was religious. And I would counsel some of them. But this particular night, a young man was laying on his bunk. And he said, "Hey, Officer. I said "Yeah." "You go to church?" I said "Yeah." He said, "What's the name of your church?" "Greater Union Baptist Church." "On the West Side?" he answered. I said since the 1960s, but he didn't even let me finish. He shouted, "That's my church!" The next thing to come out of his mouth? He said "Is Deac still there?" I said, "Yeah, Deac is still there. He's still the same. He hasn't changed."

Mary Lu Seidel
Do you have a favorite place in this church? Downstairs, upstairs, anywhere outside? That is one of your favorite places?

Deacon Fred McKinney
Well, in the back there was a room we had, and the deacons would meet on Sunday. We would go back there, and the pastor would lay out what he wants done in the service. We'd talk, you know, when he asked you, well, what do you think about your job, you're going to do something like this. And there was a calmness there. We never argued, and we never disagreed. We never told the pastor this and that and believe me it was a calming effect for all of them. At that time, there were quite a few deacons, maybe 30. Now, by this time, we didn't have maybe about 10 or 12, or something like that. Even now, when I'm coming up, I'll go and sit in there. Sometimes it's only me. Prior to preparing for the service.

We had we had Mother Mayes and Ms. Smith. And we would try to play a little bit of joke on sometimes, you know, sometimes they come in and we would, you know, kind of hunched together like this so they couldn't get in. And now, Sister Smith, she was kind of docile, but Mother Mayes, she'd say "Get over." And she had very sharp elbows. They knew that was their place to be at that particular time. That and when we had prayers meeting downstairs, there used to be a deacon on one side and a Mother on the other side. They were good. Don't mess with their position. She knew where she belonged, and he knew where he belonged. Don't cross up. You belong over here, and I come over there. And that's just how dedicated the people were here at this church. They had a position. They don't want anybody messing with. And if you want to change something, you got to let them know.

Darryl Williams
I guess because in growing up here, I just had the run of the place, especially when I was a kid.

And so, there was only one place that I can remember that we were not allowed to play, or we had to have reverence for this particular spot. And that was the pulpit. For whatever reason, these old people would not let the kids go up and touch the pulpit. And so, to this very day, I find myself, "No, you can't tell another child. Don't go up there and play now that's not the place to play." But it was when we were down on Monday nights. The Shepherd Boys and GAs. After church, when the services were over with for our groups, they would allow us to go and play in the alley. We would be out there, and they would block it off from the front so no cars can come up. And we had the run of it. And as narrow as that space was, we would all be out there playing ball playing piggy. And there were buildings on each side. And if a ball would bounce off, that's considered a one bounce. As long as you caught it on that one bounce, you can get a turn at bat. So, there were roughly around 15 boys minimum that we would be out there playing. And there were quite a few girls. Matter of fact, all the Dickerson girls, they played with us quite a few and Francine Pilmington (sp?), because she played. But when it was time to go home, Deacon Ray Brown collected us all – all those children whose parents didn't have transportation, Greater Union, through the services of Deacon Ray Brown, took us home. And it would be late in the evening, but he made sure every last one of us got home. And so that's what I mean by I had fun. But when it was time to take on adult responsibilities, it wasn't an issue. You were prepared. And I think that's what I love the most about this place. As children, we were prepared.

Darcea Gamble
Well, when I came here, I came here seeking after the Lord to see how to learn. So different parts of the church hold different meanings to me. This area here (the sanctuary), I rush up here because I normally get the word from whoever's behind that pulpit. A lot of times, even just from the music, if, especially if I'm in the choir, we would sing certain songs. So, this was a place for worship. And I love coming here. And then in the little rooms, I'm a Sunday school teacher. So that is my favorite place to teach the kids and get them quiet down and get their attention. And so, you can start putting in them what you've already learned. But my favorite places when we will all come together in that lower sanctuary -- whether it was for food, or just to get together, that's where you can come and you can be with people that you love. I would go from table to table to table we will set up tables, especially if we were serving food because Greater Union loves to eat.

Darryl Williams
It was like a family thing. Every time we had service, after that service, it was just family gathering.

Darcea Gamble
And you just sit there. And sometimes Deac would tell you, "You don't have to go home, but you got to leave here" because he would close up the church. And so, we would mingle. Even sometimes we would have services downstairs, and then even after the services we would sit around, and we want to just talk and stuff. And it's not like we haven't seen each other from the

week before, maybe sometimes the day before. We just had so much to talk about. That was my favorite part because it felt like a family. And you just say, "Okay, I'll see you next week," and come back and do the same thing over again. So that would be my favorite area. But each one of the rooms and parts of this church holds a special meaning to me.

Mary Lu Seidel
We're helping the city gather oral histories to prepare the Landmark nomination to designate this church as a Chicago Landmark to ensure that it can't be demolished or displaced. To honor its extraordinary history. If you had any message to the city and the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and ultimately the City Council for why they should Landmark Greater Union Baptist Church, what would that be?

Darryl Williams
Well, as Deacon McKinney and Darcea stated earlier, there's quite a few people still that will come by and ask if Deacon Ray Brown is still here. For the children that have come through here, if I was able to contact them all, from my age group and down, because I'm 67, that this sanctuary here, this would be filled. And I'm looking for this institution to do what we've always done. And that is to be a place of securement for each individual that would come through this door. And a place again where children can come and learn. If we established that status, we will be able to reach out to the community as it was in the past. And we still do, but on a much smaller scale. We will be able to bring children here and be able to nurture them the way that I was. That would be for me a blessing in itself. Because people when they come by, there's been a number of people that have come by this church, saw it from the outside, and said that they would just have to come and see what it looked like on the inside. These stained-glass windows, they need repair. And for the number of stained-glass windows and their size, you won't see this anywhere else. And this place? We have been a congregation for 114 years. I believe on outside of the building, on the Warren side, there's a number I think that number says 1885.

Deacon Fred McKinney
This used to be the Church of the Redeemer back then. We bought it in 1929 for $35,000.

Mary Lu Seidel
Now your congregation started in 1908. You were in a number of different locations. I know you guys don't personally know that history. None of you was around in 1908.

Darryl Williams
But we know the history of Greater Union. In fact, they walked here from their old location.

Darcea Gamble
Just the edifice itself has so much history. If could get some funding to kind of restore it and bring it back to life, that will be a big help. We spend so much money trying to keep this up. It will help us to be able to go more out into the community to draw people into this building. Be-

cause like Darryl and I said, to get out there and bring them in. We can't do it from the inside of this church. We have to go out to the community and let them know what was here. And once they get here and see the history. Just the edifice itself, just the presence of this just speaks holiness to me. And when you we've had people come in from out of town from like Germany. They don't understand a word of English, but they enjoy the service. We've had people from Italy, we've had people from France, because I was able to speak some of my limited high school French to them. But they come here and when they because I don't know that I guess we're in a registry or something. But when they come in, they see that we're close to the United Center, they want to come in, and they don't want to leave. And they feel so welcome. Whether they can speak the language or not. They tell us they want to come back when they visit the city. If we let this go down, it's going to lose something. God wants us to build up the temple. So, I think with all of this, you can't get the wood that we have here. It is just priceless. To be truthful. And I think this is a beautiful place.

Deacon Fred McKinney
There are only three places that you will see this stained glass. I think one is in France – the church is named Trinity. Then they've got a Trinity on the East Coast. And you got him here. Now the architect was responsible for all three of them. He built this church. Richardsonians. And talking about people coming here, I gave the pastor a printout maybe about 10 years ago. But anyway, you had a picture of the inside. And on the second page, there's two people – a young man and a young lady are getting married. And this was taken in 1888. Now let's fast forward to about 10 years ago. There was the great granddaughter of those two looking for the church that they got married in. And if you if you would look at the paper, you will see different places that they had written down different churches, hoping that they would get to Church of the Redeemer, which is Greater Unions now. They couldn't find it. So, I don't know if one of their younger kids in their house. Now the street was named Roby. It's Damen now, but it was Roby. And that's what they were looking for Roby. But somehow, they got the Damen part. And when the lady when they came and they see the place, they just broke down and started crying.

Then we had another lady that came. She was on a bicycle. And she said, "Sir, can I go in and look around upstairs?" So, I said, "Sure, I'll give you the 50-cent tour." So, she came in. And she said that her grandfather, they used to make these stained-glass windows. She was from Germany maybe. And she said, "You don't find these anymore. You can't even find the material to make them anymore." So, I took her around and her a history of the place. So, she took out her checkbook and wrote me a check out for $20. I said, well tell you what, if any of your friends want to come up, I'll be glad to show them around.

Like Darcea said, people have come here and just some time it's awe to me to come up those steps and see just how wide it is. What is this? About a half a block?

Darryl Williams

And for these stained-glass windows to be here now, still here. They're in need of repair, that's for sure. But it would be a major loss to the city. With all the improvements going on around, for us to lose this spot it would be a blight on this neighborhood because the people that grew up here, still have children in the area, and they know of Greater Union. So, it is for me to be of the fifth generation here. I would be awfully hurt if we could not be able to sustain this. Or if we had to lose it for whatever reason.

Deacon Fred McKinney
They're still trying to get the building. They offered Temple Church almost a million dollars. And developer look, this is a viable corner for parking.

Darryl Williams
Parking, you know, they would take a lot this size. This upstairs alone if they would be able to tear this down and then just go straight up, they could put a ton of people here. But they would just lose the human value that exists here and has existed over the years in which you would never be able to replace. And that would be the shame of it all.

Deacon Fred McKinney
Not that they would care.

Darryl Williams
And that's twice as bad.

Darcea Gamble
Because they don't have the history. They don't know the history. All they see are dollar signs And they don't know the history or understand the history. Pipe organs. Where do you find those? You got a lot of Catholic churches I think they may still have them but those are probably in Europe someplace. I don't think there's very many here and in the Chicago area. But just to see the different artifacts and things that's around here and appreciate them. People that have grown up here and have moved away. First Sunday, whenever they come back, they come back to this home. And it just exudes spirituality and camaraderie and all of that in one envelope. And to lose this would be a travesty to the whole city of Chicago. Yes, it really will. You know, you think some people think it's just a building. But it's more than that. This is history. This this family. This is community.

Deacon Fred McKinney
Agency for the community.

Darcea Gamble
To lose this off of this corner. I've always said I see Greater Union being a light housed on this corner, drawing people. A lighthouse guides people, and they are bringing them here. And we need to keep this here. We can't let it go.

Mary Lu Seidel
Do you have any final thoughts you want to add before we wrap it up? I think we have a great amount of material, and I am super thankful for your time. Genuinely.

Darcea Gamble
Just give us what we need. We will appreciate it and help take care of it. We've done the best that we could with what we have. And it would be good to have this Landmarked and know that 20 or 30 years from now our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren can come here and say our family is from this parish here.

Deacon Fred McKinney
And they would know the history of what we have been doing to keep it here. We don't give up. I mean, like you said, we moved I don't know how many places. You probably seen that long picture we got downstairs of all those people.

Darryl Williams
Yes. One from on the Damen side.

Deacon Fred McKinney
They don't give up. And I like that type of attitude. You don't give up. I mean, we've had some ups and downs, we've had some blows, we had some people talk against us. We had some people try to take us down. But they're gone. We've had some stumbles in the road, so to speak, you know, but one thing I can say about those old folks, I'm an old folk now. They did not give up. Give it up for what? We've come too far. God ain't gonna just leave me now. That was instilled in their children and their children, like you said, young children. I'm just amazed. Plus, it would be different if we went in a local locale where we didn't have competition like their stadium and places like that. These people are trying to get these buildings. They're not going to give up. That's why I believe God has a hedge around us.

Darcea Gamble
We actually have a partnership with the United Center because they have events out here and what they support the church as well. So, you got a lot of people that we can reach from the United Center over here. It's a lot of reasons. 101 reasons, I guess you can say that it would be good to have this deemed a Landmark. It would be good for the city, and it would be good for everybody in the community.

Darryl Williams
If nothing else, outside of repairing each one of these stained glass, it would be a sin before God if these stained glass were taken down, and moved elsewhere, because I doubt if they'll be able to move. The best that they can possibly do is to repair them or patch where it's needed and support it on the outside. Because on a good sunny day, you can see these stained glass, all you

have to do is just look up. You get within a block, especially looking from the east looking west, you see Greater Union and you see those stained glass. And if an individual understands history, and all they have to do is look at these stained glass. You can tell that this is an extremely old building, and it still standing solid. This is nothing fake or this is not propped up. Because even the ceiling as you said when you came in. The condition of the ceilings. These lights used to be gas lights. Now they've run electricity through them, but it is still functional if they took the electricity out and ran the gas back. It will work. And you will not find anything anywhere I would say on the north continent that will be able to compare to what we have here. As Deacon McKinney said, you would have to probably go back to Europe.

Deacon Fred McKinney
The bricks and concrete, it's about 18 inches. I mean, we had some work done in here. Guy was trying to drill, and you could see the smoke coming out coming off the drill it wouldn't go through. We are truly blessed. I mean, sometimes we have to stop and think but there when I think about it, man and how old it is. You know, and how well kept it is. We do have some work especially with tuckpointing and things of that nature and the roof. The roof we had a problem. I don't know if we still have the problem. We took care of couple of years ago. But I'm just amazed.

Darcea Gamble
These people that we're talking to, maybe they need to come and visit, visit and see what we're talking about. And everybody is saying the same thing in different ways. But maybe if they can come and experience it for themselves. I think they would understand what we're saying -- what we feel.

[Pastor Dr. McCray joined the interview.]

Mary Lu Seidel
We were just wrapping up. But we just went through kind of last thoughts. I really appreciate your time for coming out here. I'm falling more and more in love with your church every day.

Rev. Dr. McCray
In terms of ministry. There are a lot of formal ministries, etc. But I was delayed for informal ministry where a person stopped by the church. And they rang the bell asking for some assistance. And that's sort of the low level but personal ministry. It's not way out front. It's not the big programs, and so on and so forth. But it's the informal things. And that's one thing that this church being here has represented, that we know that the community is tremendously gentrifying, okay? The demographic is changing quite a bit in the community. And someone speaks of the tale of two cities. Here's what's emerging in these areas are the tales of two cities known as classes. And so, you have the very, very rich that are beginning to associate with this area of the city, but you also have continually the poor in this area. One thing that the churches can do and have done, and Greater Union has done that through the years is that these doors have been

open to those who are poor. And in immediately folks would think, well, they're poor, blacks and African Americans. But there are many more poor whites than there are poor blacks. And part of the ministry is that we have those who go out and hit the streets, and under the viaducts in the tent cities, and give a hand to persons. I was able to minister just now to a person who rang the bell, and said, “Pastor, I'm in need.” I was able to talk with him and try to verify as much information in his story. He said he has a pastor. He said he was not really looking for a handout, he just wanted to do some work any work that you have to do. He said he had just caught a record. He was in the county from December to May, and he was let out on probation. And he said he was panhandling at the service station in the area, and they call the police on him. They told him if he was caught panhandling there again, then he would go into jail for violating probation. So, he is walking by here, and he said he saw the church. So, he came to the church.

The brother needed an ID. The police department had his goods. But then after 60 days, destroyed his goods -- his IDs, his papers and so on so forth. He said he couldn’t get an ID. He actually I got money sent him because he’s on disability, but he couldn’t even get at the money because he couldn’t verify with an ID. God sent him by here as a blessing to us. It is more blessed to give than it is to receive. We were able to give him a little piece of change, and bless him and send him on his way downtown to get his ID. And that's some of the informal ministry of a church located in an area that folks say that’s a good area to live in. Yeah, but it’s also an area where folks are still struggling, face problems and challenges, and we need the Greater Union church to be here.

Mary Lu Seidel
That's probably the best note we could possibly end. I'm going to turn this off now.

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