

Russell Woods History and Overview

Russell Woods Church of Christ began as an idea the late Brother Ellis J. Bonner had some thirty-four years ago. At the time, only five African American Churches of Christ existed in the city of Detroit; Joseph Campau which met on the east side, Westside which met on the west side, Conant Gardens which met on the northeast side, Ford Avenue which met near the Highland Park/Detroit boundary line and Cameron Avenue which met about midtown. Taking into consideration the population shifts of African-Americans in the late 1960s, the northwest side of Detroit seemed ideal for an evangelistic missions.

In 1962, under the guidance of Brother Alonzo Carter and the late Brethren Coy Burgess, Granville Holt and Scott French, Brother Bonner assembled the first gathering of the Russell Woods congregation. About fifteen or twenty members met at the Fisher Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) located at the corner of West Grand Boulevard and Dexter Avenue. Many of the members were former chorus members who had sung under the direction of Brother Ellis J. Bonner. After several months at the YMCA, worship services became a challenge as nothing could be left on site. Everything used for worship had to be brought to each service every Sunday. As the attendance increased so did the need for such items such as Bibles, song books etc. Brother Bonner's car became affectionately known as "the Rollin' Church" or the "Ark of the Covenant."

By the fall of 1962, a contract was signed with the Detroit Board of Education to use the auditorium of McKerrow School; located on Collingwood and Cascade. Although the rent was steep, the surprising side effect of this location was the positive response from the community. On some Sundays, there were more children than could adequately be accommodated. McKerrow School was also the site of the first Gospel Revival held by Russell Woods. With Brother G. P. Holt of Indianapolis, Indiana doing the preaching, the success of this meeting almost doubled the existing membership. At the end of the school year, the lease had expired and another location had to be found.

In order to establish a sense of permanency in this Northwest locale, a house on Broadstreet near the corner of Burlingame was rented. This home was converted into a chapel and used for several years as a place of worship. The elders and deacons of the Westside Church of Christ sanctioned and supported the Russell Woods mission. Westside, along with Northwest, provided song books, furniture, the use of their baptismal facilities and financial assistance during these formative years.

During the spring of 1965, a building on the southwest corner of Broadstreet and Burlingame was purchased. Under the leadership of two expert building and tradesmen, Brother James Holt and Brother John Wyatt, plans were underway to renovate this property. The actual completion of the building spanned several years for it was a huge undertaking. It is important to note that during this time a full range of church activities continued. In 1971, Russell Woods issued bonds in order to complete the major portion of construction. Once again the Russell Woods membership found themselves worshipping in a temporary facility. This time it was the Don Bosco Home for Boys. While providing a place to worship, this setting gave Russell Woods and opportunity to impact the lives of young boys between the ages of seven and eighteen. Finally in 1975, the Russell Woods Congregation was able to return to their new Church building on Broadstreet.

Many great preachers and teachers have labored at this congregation with more zeal than the most humble of them all; Brother Ellis Bonner, Brother James Snow, Brother Gregory Freeman, Brother Clarence Locke, Brother David McFalls, Brother Cecil Bullock and Brother Robert Holt. In 1995, Brother Edward Cribbs became the eighth minister to the fifty member congregation over a period of thirty years. Today, the Church has approximately 125 members. In 1998, Russell Woods witnessed the ordination of Brother Alfred Parks and Brother Willie Sledge as deacons. Under the guidance of God, the church will make history again by ordaining Brothers, Tommie Slaughter, Harold Sledge and Willie Sledge as elders on Sunday, April 23, 2000.