

Spotlight on Canaan Baptist Church



The sanctuary of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, 10th Street below Market Street, is equipped with ornate grilles that run in parallel rows like this one along the ceiling. This system, which has been used since the 1920s to ventilate the building, may be used by the congregation in the near future to implement central air-conditioning. Detail of photo: William Douds Photography.

When the congregation of Canaan Baptist Church decided they had outgrown their little brick church at Belfield and Haines, they didn't fool around with a slightly larger building. Instead, in 1972, under the leadership of Pastor Gus Roman, Canaan Baptist took the leap into a building more than twice the size of their original church: the Westside Presbyterian Church at Pulaski Avenue and Winona Street in Germantown.

Westside, a large, handsome Gothic structure, was built in 1891 and designed by architect Mantle Fielding, Jr. Large additions were made in the 1920s by architect Charles Bolton, including a school building and auditorium. The church building was in excellent condition when the Canaan Baptist congregation arrived, having been well maintained by a concerned but dwindling congregation. In addition to a beautiful and spacious sanctuary, the property included large, bright meeting rooms, community spaces, and even a combination auditorium/gymnasium.

The new building took a lot of getting used to, in more ways than one. As Pastor Roman explains, "Our challenge was a building that was not designed for an African American congregation. These were not our symbols, these were not our designs. And there were so many rooms, and a gymnasium - we had to decide what changes to make, and how to use all this space."

The congregation began a series of feasibility studies to determine the best way to modify and make use of their new building. Most importantly, the congregation had to determine how to suit a traditional European Presbyterian sanctuary to the needs of a large and growing African American Baptist church. One of the primary issues was the location of the choir, which faced the altar rather than the congregation. "Singers must be more visible here," explains Pastor Roman. "In most African American churches, singers are in fellowship with the congregation." Rather than rebuilding the sanctuary, the choir now performs on the marble steps just below the altar. Several stained glass windows, however, have been replaced with more Afro-centrist images. "In our community," Pastor Roman says, "there is an uneasiness with the Europeanism of religion. The damage that's done to black people by seeing ultimate authority as Caucasian is problematic."

In addition to small changes in the sanctuary, the congregation of Canaan Baptist set to work making their new home a cultural center and a place where service to the community came first.

Today Canaan Baptist, "The Church That Cares," is a major presence in the Germantown community. Its large quarters, which at first were overwhelming, are now too small to accommodate all the outreach programs the church offers. To house such programs as computer literacy and Christian Family Life, the congregation has purchased two additional properties in the neighborhood. The gym has become a thriving neighborhood facility, offering recreational basketball, karate and other sports for the local community.

Meanwhile, the church building, while generally in good shape, has required both maintenance and improvement. Working with Michael Stern, the Preservation Alliance's director of technical services, congregants received grant money to take care of critical roof leaks, and developed a plan to create new facilities including improved electrical and heating systems, more bathrooms, an updated fellowship hall, and improved facilities for disabled or elderly congregants.

Amid all the growth and change has come some turmoil. As the church becomes more of a "regional draw," featuring lectures by such prominent figures as Jesse Jackson and Jeremiah Wright, thousands are drawn to its quiet Germantown location. In a residential neighborhood accustomed to a local parish church, parking and overcrowding have become major issues. To resolve the problems, church leaders have met with neighborhood representatives. Their solutions include shuttle buses from area parking lots to the church during busy Sundays and major events, and the addition of a community relations coordinator to work with neighbors on problems and opportunities.

What's next for Canaan Baptist? Says Rev. Roman, "Collaboration with other African American Baptist churches may well be our next big thrust. Though Baptist churches are traditionally independent, we are forced by problems in the community to come together." Soon, he believes, the Baptist African American clergy of Philadelphia will join together to decide how to have the greatest positive impact on neighborhoods. Together, their combined energy, resources, and leadership may well improve education, values, opportunities, and resources for thousands of young Philadelphians.