

Hallelujah and Amen!



Carlos Gonzalez, Star Tribune

Pastor Randolph Cooper welcomed parishioners and well-wishers to Garden of Gethsemane Church on Friday for an inaugural service to mark the completion of the century-old church's renovation. The nondenominational congregation, made up largely of Liberian immigrants, bought the structure five years ago.

A once-derelict church in north Minneapolis is reborn with the help of a friendly developer.

By [STEVE BRANDT](#), Star Tribune

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During the service, Pastor Randolph Cooper showed his appreciation for Stuart Ackerberg, CEO of the Ackerberg Group. Ackerberg personally guaranteed \$1 million to finance the project.

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Five years ago, Garden of Gethsemane Ministries bought a dilapidated church in the Tangletown area of north Minneapolis.

By early last year, little progress had been made toward a renovation of the century-old brick-and-shingle building. Many in the congregation were fed up, and nearly a year ago, a major portion splintered off.

"In their minds, this was not a doable thing," said Pastor Randolph Cooper.

Enter developer Stuart Ackerberg, who has been working nearby on buildings along W. Broadway. By last June, financing had been arranged. By September, sawdust was flying. And by Christmas Eve, the Liberian-dominated congregation was able to hold a service in its nearly completed building on James Avenue N.

Ackerberg's involvement with the church a block off Broadway didn't happen until Liberian-born city housing official Elfric Porte introduced him to Cooper.

The nondenominational church had been turned down for a rehab loan by banks all over town. That changed when Ackerberg, who is Jewish, personally guaranteed financing of nearly \$1 million for the Christian congregation.

"It is like a miracle from God," Cooper said. Ackerberg Group donated its professional services, as did some of the other partners in the rehab project done under Ackerberg's nonprofit wing.

But it took the unwavering optimism of a pastor like Cooper to see the potential in the building back in 2003. There were holes in the roof. The big stained-glass windows had been stolen while the church sat empty. A stairway to the balcony was listing precariously.

Still, when Cooper first looked at the church, "We saw a double rainbow between the trees," and took that as a sign.

Calvin Littlejohn, an Ackerberg project manager, recalls pigeons flying around inside the former Forest Heights Congregational Church as the project began. There was also a raccoon in residence.

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