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Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration At West Side Church Where King Preached Returns In-Person After 3 Years

At the event at Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church, speakers vowed to put King's ideals into action and disavowed racism and antisemitism.



By Maia McDonald January 17, 2023



Local singer Deonte Baker (right) performs during the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church on Jan. 16, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

NORTH LAWDALE — For the first time in three years, a West Side church community gathered in person to honor Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and legacy.

[Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church](#), a historically Black church in North Lawndale, has held an event marking King's birthday every year since 2015, but the event was held virtually in 2021 and 2022 due to concerns over COVID-19.

On Monday, church members returned to the church at 3622 W. Douglas Blvd., where King preached while living in Chicago in the 1960s.

Monday's celebration featured performances and speakers including Stone Temple's pastor Bishop Derrick M. Fitzpatrick, North Lawndale Historical and Cultural Society founder Blanche Killingsworth, Tiffany Walden, co-founder of [The TRiiBE](#), and others.

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Volunteers from the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Jewish United Fund gave away food to those in need during the event.

Fitzpatrick, who's led the church along with his wife Pastor Reshorna Fitzpatrick since 1996, said it felt special to see people gathering at the West Side church for the annual celebration once again.

"It's phenomenal because you get to see faces you haven't seen in awhile," Fitzpatrick

said. "It's phenomenal because you get to feel the energy and the realism, from the words that they share, from the expressions that they give."



Attendees of the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church pose for group selfies on Jan. 16, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

Ward Miller, executive director of Preservation Chicago, also spoke at Monday's event. Miller was instrumental in getting the church [city landmark status in 2016](#).

"It's about community," he said. "It's about different communities coming together. Today, you saw the Jewish United Fund and several synagogues come together with the Stone Temple congregation here on the West Side of the city. You saw different races and different socioeconomic groups coming together."

Before Stone Temple was a Christian church, it was Jewish synagogue. Many of the building's original fixtures, including several Stars of David, still remain.

Pastor Chris Harris of Bright Star Church Chicago and Rabbi Shoshanah Conover of Temple Sholom said the city's Black and Jewish communities face many of the same challenges.

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They urged those gathered to "stand with" and "show up" for each other to fight racism and antisemitism. Pastor Fitzpatrick said it's important for people of different religions to support each other amid a rise in antisemitism nationwide.

"Just like we struggle with racism, our Jewish brothers and sisters struggle with the increase in ridiculous antisemitism. We will stand with you, we will be with you and if necessary we will fight with you," Harris said.





A community member looks over free produce at a food giveaway at Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church on Jan. 16, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

Volunteers like Sarah Trowbridge, the assistant director of the Jewish United Fund's TOV Network, were outside passing out free meat, produce, art supplies, shoes and other items to community members, even in Monday's cold, windy and rainy weather.

"To me, volunteering, giving back, service, whatever you want to call it, is about human connection," she said.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks at Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church in 1966.

Just a few years before his death in 1968, King came to Chicago with his wife Coretta Scott King to live in a rundown apartment at 16th Street and Hamlin Avenue. He was invited to come to the city by the Chicago Freedom Movement to address redlining and housing inequality.

King spent 17 months in Chicago, fighting for fair and open housing with nonviolent strategies like rallies, boycotts and grassroots lobbying. A march in what was predominantly-white Marquette Park at the time led to a mob of angry white residents attacking King and other protestors, according to WTTW.

King also preached at Stone Temple and inspired community members to fight against racial injustice.

Killingsworth, who also helps organize and plan the annual King Day event, said the celebration isn't just about honoring the past but also welcoming the next generations who'll still be working to improve their neighborhoods once older generations have moved on.





After the Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church, community members could take home free food. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

“I tell a lot of my older friends, we’re not going to last forever, just ‘cause you’re feeling good today. You’re not a new car. It’s time to get a new one. Pass that knowledge onto

that child. You’ll be surprised by the young people that really want to know about who you are and what you are.”

Bishop Fitzpatrick hopes next year’s celebration at Stone Temple will be bigger and more impactful, as it will coincide with King’s actual birthday on Jan. 15.

“Dr. King said we have to have an audacious hope for the future and so I have that audacious hope that the future is gonna be brighter,” Fitzpatrick said. “We may have some dark yesterdays but we’ll also have some brighter tomorrows.”

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