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Up From the Ashes, a Symbol That Hate Does Not Win

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SPRINGFIELD, Mass.

In the hours after the 2008 election of the country’s first African-American president, three white men crept up to a predominantly African-American church being built here in Springfield, blessed it corruptly with gasoline — and faded into the fresh November night.

Soon the church’s pastor, Bishop Bryant Robinson Jr., was at the crime scene’s flickering edge, weary, saddened. Moments before, he had been anticipating a new chapter in American history, and now here was one page, stuck. He didn’t need an investigation to tell him this was a racist act of arson. He is a black man with snow in his hair; he knew.

As he watched the new home for the Macedonia Church of God in Christ burn to the ground, Bishop Robinson imagined only one response: Rebuild.

Now, nearly three years later, that election night’s crisp air of possibility has all but faded in Washington, where the first African-American president, [Barack Obama](#), struggles with grinding wars, a broken economy and spirit-killing partisanship. But here in Springfield, the smoke has lifted to reveal a new, 20,000-square-foot church standing on top of an old crime scene, its sanctuary walls painted the color of a clear blue sky.

Resting in one of its pews the other day, a silver cane by his side, Bishop Robinson, 74, said that this building on Tinkham Road reflects the ever-unfolding American story of race, in Washington, Springfield, everywhere. “The hatred in our country,” he said. “And the goodness in our country.”

The election night burning of a New England church became national news. A [“This Land” column](#) shared how the pastor’s father had left segregated Alabama, gathered together a congregation in Springfield, and bought an old downtown church to use as a house of worship; how his eldest son and successor, Bryant, worked for years to raise the money to build a new church on the city’s outskirts; and how, when it burned down, he just knew that racism had fueled the fire.

Now, sitting in a pew, Bishop Robinson referred to another part of family history. How, in Emelle, Ala., on July 4, 1930, his grandfather and uncles found themselves in an argument with a white store owner over a car battery. How that dispute escalated into a violent, hate-filled mob scene that left several dead, white and black, including a pregnant black woman and the bishop’s Uncle Esau — who was lynched.

So, you see, Bishop Robinson just knew.

Two months after the fire, three white men in their 20s were charged with burning down the church to express their rage at the thought of a black president. Two pleaded guilty, and the third was convicted after trial, in a case that The Republican newspaper of Springfield described as a “blot on the whole city.”

“Unfortunately, it was a confirmation of my experiences as an African-American,” Bishop Robinson said, adding: “My faith teaches me to forgive, and I forgive them. But I cannot be accepting of their behavior. I cannot be victimized by hatred. So I have to move forward.”

In moving forward, he and his congregation of a few hundred found outstretched hands. Donations arrived from around the country, while volunteers cleared the debris and carted away the ruined foundation. But the journey had its peaks and valleys.

For example, its leaders applied for federal assistance under the Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996, which was enacted after a spate of house-of-worship burnings. They filled out a checklist that asked, with bureaucratic bluntness, what the arson had destroyed:

Sanctuary (yes). Choir seating (yes). Fellowship hall (yes). Pastor’s office (yes).

The Macedonia church eventually won the very last government loan guarantee available under the law, which was good. But it had trouble securing a loan for the government to back, which was bad.

That is, until Gov. Deval Patrick addressed the Urban League of Springfield in February 2010. He explained that the church had just learned that day that its bank was not inclined to provide a vital construction loan, even though the church had already paid off the loan related to its first attempt at a new home.

“I know that in this audience tonight are people who care about Macedonia,” Mr. Patrick had said. “Are people who understand we need this church to rise as a symbol that hate doesn’t win. And I know that there are people here who are in the finance field or know people who are, who can rally to help this very, very worthy cause.”

Soon the church had the \$1.8 million bank loan it needed. And construction began in earnest.

Along the way, a group called the [National Coalition for Burned Churches](#) offered rotating teams of volunteers. Here came some Catholics from suburban Chicago. Here came some Methodists and Jews from Northern California. Here came some students from Harvard, and some Congregationalists from the town of Millbury.

A few of these volunteers left behind handwritten messages on the walls concealed by the church hallway’s dropped ceiling — a form of spiritual graffiti, you might say. “His love endures forever.” “May God dwell in this house forever.”

There is still work to do; the landscaping, for example, will have to wait until spring. And the need to pay for everything remains; the church, Bishop Robinson admits, is in perpetual fund-raising mode. No matter: what has risen is a large, simple structure of wonder.

A sanctuary — yes — with 60 wooden pews purchased from a North Carolina business called Affordable Church Furniture. Choir seating — yes — with many of the chairs donated by a Lutheran church. A fellowship hall — yes — with more than enough room for wedding receptions and funeral repasts.

And — yes— a pastor's office, on the very spot where gasoline was poured on that hopeful, horrible November night. "The guys came from those woods," Bradford Martin Jr., the church's indefatigable lawyer, said as he led a tour through the building. "They busted in here. They splashed it on the outside and they splashed it on the inside."

On Saturday's misty morning, members of the Macedonia congregation gathered in their new home for a rousing dedication. Dressed in their finest, they prayed and sang and swayed.

Here was the governor of Massachusetts, and the mayor of Springfield, and a police officer who worked on the arson investigation, and, all the way from California, Charles E. Blake Sr., the presiding bishop and chief apostle of the Church of God in Christ.

And here, of course, was Bishop Robinson, steadied by his cane and giving thanks for this celebration that would not, could not, be denied.