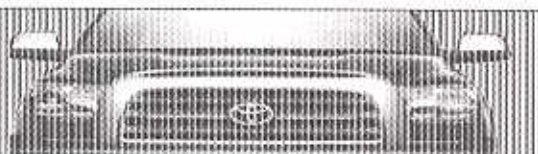


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Spreading hope and joy across a troubled corner

Lara Becker Liu

KARIN VON VOIGTLANDER staff photographer KARIN VON VOIGTLANDER staff photographer

Lara Becker Liu

Staff Writer

Joy Community Church has nearly 250 members, the deed to a vacant building and a mission.

The church, at 890 N. Goodman St., has taken the unusual step of buying neighboring property in hopes of reclaiming a troubled street corner. Like many corners in Rochester, this one, at North Goodman and Bay streets, had fallen prey to crime; the buildings around it, to neglect.

"The corner had been a corner of darkness," said the Rev. Tony Martorana.

So Martorana, 61, who took over leadership of Joy Community Church after the former pastor fell ill, enjoined his congregants to save it. "You're going to light the night," he said.

And they did — set it ablaze is more like it, by installing high-wattage lights on the building next door.

Now they plan to do so in the figurative sense: In the two-story, 8,000-square-foot building, at 904 and 906-918 N. Goodman St., the church intends to put a clinic, an ice cream parlor, a coffeehouse "for fellowship" and the Hope Shop — a ministry center that will offer food and clothing; a community phone and copy machine; and instruction in computer literacy, reading and English language.

"To expand and enlarge, stretch out to the left and the right," said Martorana, echoing



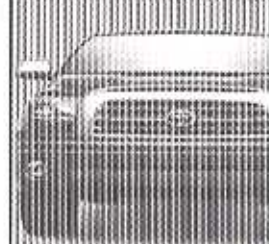
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the instructions left him by the former pastor, the Rev. Al Gerhardt. "That's all happening."

The first floor of the building had been home to a sandwich shop, and a pizza place and bar; the second, to six apartments. All that remains are ripped-up walls and floors, the odd piece of industrial ware and a growing stockpile of things the church will need to reinvent the place: donated medical equipment for the clinic, boxes of Pampers, benches for an outdoor cafe that Martorana envisions in the parking lot out back.

The building brims with good intentions — in other words, it needs work — and Martorana is counting on volunteers to help. Some, from other area churches and one in Florida, already have. Joy Community should have no problem finding more, if its past success at overcoming obstacles is any indication.

Church members over a number of years raised at least \$135,000 to purchase the Goodman building. In the last several years, they've also renovated the church, a former funeral home, and changed its name from New Jerusalem to Joy Community.

Meanwhile, membership has doubled, and diversified. The formerly all-white church — which moved to its current location in 1985 from Bushnell's Basin because members felt a calling to serve people in the city — is now 30 percent African-American and Hispanic, by Martorana's estimate.

And the corner on which the church and ministry center stand isn't so troubled anymore, although congregants have had to endure repeated vandalism of their cars and the parking lot.

"When I drive by there, I look and I'm amazed at how proactive they are," said Pete Brunett, eastside commander for the Rochester Police Department. That intersection had been plagued with "violent event after violent event," he said, but it's much quieter since Joy Community asserted its presence.

Martorana has ingratiated himself with the police and asked them to hang around the church, for example, on Father's Day "so the police could be seen just saying hello to people and walking around," said Brunett.

"He's really trying to make a difference down there. You can tell he really cares, and if he cares that much, it rubs off on other people. The police officers are actually drawn to that location to help out."

Martorana describes himself as a visionary. "I'm not a maintenance (man). I'm kind of a builder," he said.

In fact, the church is negotiating for property behind it to build a new sanctuary. Images of what it might look like, as well as the ice cream parlor, coffee shop and a youth center, flash on a flat-screen TV outside the main sanctuary. "Hopes, dreams," Martorana said as the pictures popped up.

Originally, though, he didn't envision building anything in the church's current location. The nondenominational Christian congregation hadn't grown since it moved to Rochester, and no one from the neighborhood attended. Martorana, who lives in Irondequoit, advocated for moving to a suburb.

"I said, 'If in one year's time it doesn't grow, let's move and send money back to the community,'" he said.

But they stayed put, and their money did, too, although their investment isn't only monetary. The church, Martorana said, throws block parties in the summer at which it screens movies and serves "a thousand hot dogs and hamburgers." "And the city folks," Martorana said, "have a safe place to sit."

In the future, Martorana **hopes** to provide on-the-job training and a small stipend for neighborhood residents who come to work at the ice cream parlor and coffee shop.

He **hopes** to transform the apartments above into temporary housing for the needy, and the parking lot into a free farmers market.

"We use the parking lot like it's Coney Island," Martorana said.

For all its positive impact, though, the church is indeed still an island. The parking lot backs up to what Martorana said is a crack house. Around the corner, he said, lives a family that had no gas or electricity, no refrigerator and holes in their roof.

"Coming from New York City, I've never seen poverty like this," said Martorana, a Bronx native. "The need is so tremendous."

But so, it seems, is Joy Community's drive to fill it. Church members deliver free groceries to about 30 area homes on Saturdays, and they distribute free food from Wegmans on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

On a recent Tuesday, several pastors put out loaves of Wegmans bread, doughnuts and produce.

"We've had a steady stream of people come through," said Bill Cody, community relief pastor.

Vanessa Gill, placing a cucumber in a plastic bag, declared the church's actions "really wonderful."

"It's cleaned up," the North Goodman resident said. "It's a lot safer when you can get out your car and not see a lot of people on the street."

Behind her, a family of six pulled up in a van. The driver, Victor Milton, explained that he and his wife and four children had just moved to Rochester from Michigan and were lacking a few things. In a flash, Cody ducked into the ministry center and returned with some chairs, and an offer of a matching table and a bed.

"Welcome to the community," Martorana said to Milton's wife, Brenda, as the men loaded the van. "Good to have you here."

LBECKER@DemocratandChronicle.com

If you go

What: Live nativity scene and holiday celebration.

When: 5 to 9 p.m. Dec. 22.

Where: Joy Community Church, 890 N. Goodman St.

Information: For more about this event, or about the church, call (585) 288-0030.

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