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A pillar of West Garfield Park to retire

After decades of working to improve a troubled West Side neighborhood through an organization she founded, Mary Nelson will step down in July

December 12, 2004 | By Linda Gartz. Linda Gartz is a Chicago freelance writer.

At West End and Keeler Avenues in Chicago's West Garfield Park, an elliptical blue-green dome rises above the surrounding bungalows and two-flats. It is the pinnacle of Bethel Church, a symbol of community and an anchor to this neighborhood for 125 years.

For more than half of the last century, it was the home church for three generations of my family. Beginning in the mid-1960s, after the area was crippled by riots, poverty, drugs and despair, Bethel was determined to re-create community out of chaos, and it became the spiritual base and guiding light for one of the nation's most successful community development organizations: Bethel New Life.

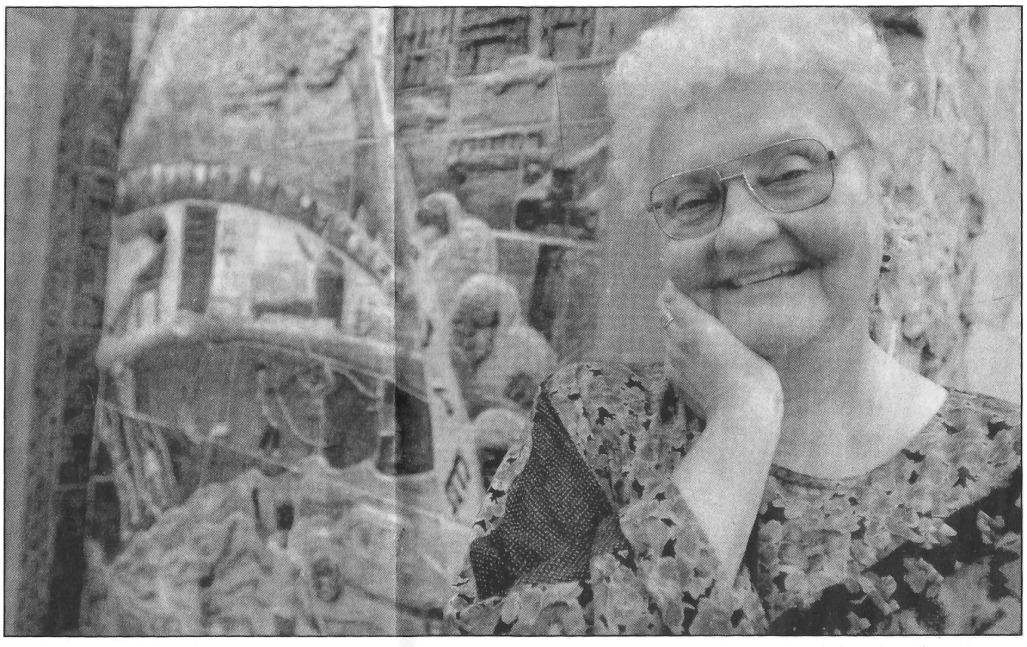
Bethel New Life stands at a crossroads. It's looking back on a quarter century of bringing jobs, housing, health care and hope to this once-impoverished place--and looking ahead to a changing of the guard. After 25 years as its president, the group's founder and visionary, Mary Nelson, has decided to step down in July.

Looking back on the organization's accomplishments, Nelson said Bethel Church has been at the core of rebuilding the neighborhood. "It's the people," she said. "Their prayers shore us up. There's a sense of partnership and the role of faith in community-building."

Bethel Church has a history of creating community on the West Side from its beginning. Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded in 1891. In the early days, services were in German to meet the needs of residents like my grandparents, ethnic Germans who began attending Bethel in 1910 after emigrating from Romania.

By the early '30s, Bethel provided a lively gathering place for young people, including my dad, Fred, who participated in one of three large choirs, summer picnics, fall horseback riding and winter sleigh rides.

My parents married at Bethel in 1942, and seven years later, they purchased their first home around the corner from the church on Washington Boulevard, where I grew up.



Tribune photo by Milbert O. Brown

West Garfield Park was a vibrant neighborhood in the '50s. On and around Madison Street was a shopper's paradise: specialty stores, movie theaters, a branch library, and the kids' favorite, the Off-the-Street-Club, where we painted ceramics, wove potholders and made papier-mache puppets.

But we had no idea our lives were built along a fault line of social unrest that would shortly lay waste to this area. Between 1960 and 1965, 30,000 whites left West Garfield Park, and 60,000 blacks moved in.

The effect on my church was dramatic. By 1965, there were sometimes only three members at choir practice, and on Sundays, we sang in a church virtually devoid of worshipers. In March of that year, our retiring pastor, Oscar Kaitschuck, sobbed as his last benediction echoed in the emptiness.

The new pastor, David Nelson, arrived five months later in the August heat with his sister, Mary. "I only came to help David get settled in. I thought of it as temporary," recalled Mary Nelson. Within three days of their arrival, the first riots exploded along Madison Street when a firetruck raced out of the Pulaski-Wilcox station with no one manning the ladder. It swung out of control on a turn, killing a young black woman. Rioters burned buildings, looted stores and threw bricks through passing car windows.

In 1966, we moved 5 miles north, but my parents didn't sell their buildings on Washington. Instead, my father returned to his old neighborhood every Saturday to maintain them as rental properties.

After Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968, a far more devastating riot ripped apart West Garfield Park, destroying the Madison Street business district. Manufacturing jobs disappeared from the area. Banks closed. Businesses and hundreds of homes were burned out or shuttered.

With vacant lots and hollowed-out buildings on every block, the area drew comparisons to Berlin after World War II. But there was no Marshall Plan.

"By 1979, we knew we had to do something about housing, or there wouldn't be a community to be church of," Nelson said.

In 1979, the Nelsons turned to Bethel Church's members to contribute $10 per week to raise the $5,000 needed to purchase and rehab an abandoned three-flat at 367 N. Karlov Ave. With that bold move, Bethel New Life was born.

Mary Nelson became renowned for her creative approaches to providing low-income housing. In 1983, my parents were in their late 60s when Bethel New Life offered them a way to sell their buildings, which were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. The organization agreed to pay half the appraised value of two of their properties, over time. The other half was treated as a tax-deductible contribution to the organization.

For neighborhood residents wanting to own a home, Bethel used the self-help model: Potential buyers could invest sweat equity to renovate or rebuild housing in lieu of a down payment. One building at a time, Bethel began reclaiming the neighborhood.

Today, Bethel New Life's 2005 budget is $13.5 million. Nelson is credited with pulling together funding for its projects from an intricate intertwining of local, state, federal and foundation money as well as from contributions and partnerships. Under Nelson's leadership, the organization has brought more than $120 million in investments into the West Garfield Park community, placed more than 7,000 people in jobs, developed more than 1,100 units of affordable housing, and involved more than 12,000 people in its initiatives.

"It's like a big wheel," said Kate Lane, a Bethel Church member for 38 years and director of New Life Management. "We just keep trying to solve one problem after another." Bethel New Life recognized that solving the intertangled problems of this ravaged community required a holistic approach, so its initiatives have included welfare-to-work, nutrition and literacy programs, as well as employment training and services.

This holistic philosophy is particularly evident in two of Bethel's most high-profile projects. The most recent is the $4.5 million Lake-Pulaski Commercial Center, which houses Bethel's employment services, five commercial storefronts, a bridge to the Pulaski Green Line elevated train stop, and cutting-edge, energy-conserving construction.

Bethel's riskiest undertaking came with the purchase of the defunct St. Anne's Hospital in 1989 for $3.2 million. "It was our largest and most difficult project to date," said Mary Nelson. After pulling together a web of$35 million in financing over 15 years, the formerly shuttered building now houses Bethel's administrative offices, a cultural and performing arts center, child and adult day care, 125 units of senior housing, and 85 assisted-living units for seniors.

A Bethel Church member since childhood and external relations director for Bethel New Life, Marcia Turner calls the organization "a clearinghouse for opportunity."

Valencia Cooper found her opportunity when she turned to Bethel's Supportive Housing Program, which works with homeless families. After completing a treatment program to kick a 15-year heroin addiction, Cooper needed a place to stay with her two children--and the support to kick her habit. "I tried and failed eight times to get clean," she said, weeping as she talked about her addiction. "Bethel never gave up on me."

She has been heroin-free for almost 2 1/2 years, but the help didn't end there. Cooper moved into a Bethel-owned subsidized apartment and now has a job working as a residential aide in one of its supportive housing sites. She's an example of how Bethel both gives and gets back.

"Our faith challenges us to help our neighbor," said Kaanaeli Makundi, director of supportive housing. "You have to believe in transforming a life."

Some wonder if Bethel New Life will be transformed with the partial retirement of Mary Nelson, whose ability to find funding out of a panoply of financial and governmental institutions is legendary.

"She will be hard to replace," Makundi said. "She has so much compassion and faith that push her to the limit."

"We are looking for someone with passion," Nelson said. "We've already hired a consultant to work with the [Bethel New Life] board and the staff, so it's a very participatory process. It will be a terrific opportunity for more people to be involved, an opportunity to fly."

No matter who heads up Bethel New Life, the core and strength of the organization still emanates from the small red-brick church on Keeler and West End, where my grandparents, my father and I found energy, support and community.

"The most important thing about the church," Nelson said, "is it gives us a chance to be God's servants in the community. I hope that continues as the promise."
