

PILGRIM BAPTIST CHURCH

The Pilgrim Baptist Church burned to the ground in January, 2006. This fire was poignant for a number of reasons—not least, because Pilgrim was a building designed by the renowned architect Louis Sullivan. It was also the actual birthplace of Gospel music. In the early 1930's, Thomas A. Dorsey had lost his wife and child in a car accident. This tragedy prompted him to compose “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” considered to be the first Gospel song. Gospel is a fusion of Spirituals with Blues and Jazz influences. It was controversial at first, and Dorsey was the music director at Pilgrim for decades.



Before the embers stopped smoking, Burners Without Borders were volunteering to help the devastated community in their rebuilding efforts. John Culkin and Tom LaPorte offered to launch a web site, and financed the first several years of hosting and design. Barkley Anderson and Brian Wiles volunteered their scanning services to help re-launch their photographic archive, which had been lost in the fire. On successive Sundays, we invited the congregation to bring photographs for scanning. They prayed and we scanned. Everyone got their pictures back before they left. One treasure made available was an unviewed 16mm film of Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking at the old church in the 1960's.



Montana Butsch and Tom LaPorte attended the church weekly for months in a successful effort to make friends and demonstrate sincerity. When Earth Day rolled around, they invited the Senior Choir to join the Earth Night Concert with fire dancing, ambient guitar, and the New Millennium Orchestra performing on the far north side. Their section of the program was called “Fire with the Choir”, and the intention was to remind the rest of Chicago that a rebuilding effort was underway. Everyone was moved by the entrance of the choir—some of whom had difficulty with stairs—and the music was over the top.

Burners Without Borders also assisted them by financing the printing of the program for their annual Thomas A. Dorsey Concert, and they devoted a half page ad to thank those responsible.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Keep showing up. It may take people some time to get to know you, especially if it is across cultures. Good will always comes through.
- Don't wear your Burning Man on your sleeve. Let your actions speak for you, and the rest will come out in the context of emerging friendships.
- Show respect for the cultures you are entering. Dress with respect for their customs and act as you would in your grandparents' house.
- Allow for a learning curve on both sides. Especially if someone has suffered a loss, they may be slow to meet your requirements. Patience and love are virtues and haste can be misunderstood.

- Make sure you have an “exit strategy” and can turn over ongoing projects to the people they benefit. Otherwise, you can get into a vending role you did not anticipate and for which you are not being rewarded.
- Keep showing up. It demonstrates sincerity, and makes you family.