

Among royalty: Bishop Brazier passes the baton

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

In the 1960s, famed community organizer Saul Alinsky, Arthur M. Brazier and the Woodlawn Organization took on the University of Chicago, the mayor's office, some church groups and even this magazine as they strove to improve life for people in the Woodlawn community near Hyde Park.

This summer, the 86-year-old Bishop Brazier retired from his position as pastor of the now 20,000-member Apostolic Church of God in Chicago (where Barack Obama spoke on Father's Day). Along with developing the church's ever-expanding and paid-for sanctuary and campus, Brazier helped give life and light and safety to the environs of the church, while he provided a model for people beyond Woodlawn and Chicago.

In the 1960s, Brazier was called soft of manner but "hard-nosed," and his relationship with his church's neighbor, the University of Chicago, was rocky. The school was accused—not always without reason—of adding to the problems of the crime-ridden, overcrowded, underfunded, overlooked Woodlawn area. Yet at a dinner on October 19, 1993, Hugo Sonnenschein, the soon-to-be-inaugurated president of the university, invited Brazier to speak. They saw themselves not as adversaries, but as partners in building a better neighborhood.

Just a few weeks ago, my wife, Harriet, and I were at the Apostolic Church of God for the wedding of our friend Elizabeth Norman, an admired soprano who often sings there. The wedding was a grand affair, rivaling a House of Windsor ceremony for elegance, but outshining it for spiritual, familial and gospelled liveliness. At the reception we sat with Bishop Brazier and his wife. Another guest whispered in my ear, "You're with royalty today!"

We had also been at the church on January 26, 1986, chronicled in Chicago history as the day the Bears won Super Bowl XX. Brazier's son (and, as of this summer, successor), Byron, helped us cram into a pew. At that service, 18 people were

baptized, we honored a couple hundred members who had visited prisoners in the week past and, of course, we gloried in the music.

In the midst of it all, Brazier made a plea: would the regulars please come to the men's fellowship that afternoon during the Super Bowl. He promised there would be giant televisions, sandwiches and prayers to honor the festivities, but he knew that missing the fellowship for the game would still be a temptation. I whispered to the woman next to me, "They are having a men's meeting during the Super Bowl!" She wore a face of woe: "Yes, but I fear attendance will be way down. There may only be 400 or 500 men there."

Churches like the Apostolic Church of God, Trinity United Church of Christ and other largely black congregations are the soul of this city. High school kids sing in their choirs. Hundreds of sick and homebound are visited by their parishioners. These churches don't preach politics, but they cannot but be political, because the *polis*, the city, is their arena for the works of God as they interpret and experience them.

So as Brazier, after 48 years, passes on the church's pastoral leadership to his son, we by instinct bow—because we know royalty when we see it.