

After Election Day fire, church sees glimmers of hope

by [Patrick Johnson](#)

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SPRINGFIELD, Mass. (RNS) There is a roof, four walls, windows and doors, and a concrete floor.

Eventually all the ornamentation and decor will be in place, but for now the interior of the rebuilt Macedonia Church of God in Christ is a maze of 2-by-4 frames and exposed electrical wires. Workers are pounding nails, hanging insulation and hauling in supplies.

Sitting on a picnic table in the middle of the concrete floor and tucking his hands inside his coat for warmth, Bishop Bryant Robinson Jr. said he is able to see to the end of a four-year journey that has seen its share of Job-like trials along the way.

"I want to have the dedication in 2011. I don't want to have to wait until 2012," he said. "I don't want to have it in the winter. I don't want the weather to be an issue for the people who want to celebrate with us."

The biggest test of the Macedonia congregation came a little more than two years ago, in the early morning hours of Nov. 5, 2008.

Prosecutors say three Springfield men, angered that the country elected its first black president, directed their rage at the new church being constructed for a predominantly black congregation.

The arson set off a massive investigation involving local, state and federal authorities that eventually led to the arrests of Benjamin J. Haskell, Thomas A. Gleason Jr., and Michael Jacques.

Haskell, 23, was sentenced in November to nine years in prison after pleading guilty to a civil rights violation and destruction of religious property. He also must pay a share of \$1.7 million in restitution to the church and serve three years supervised release after completing his prison term.

Gleason, Jr., 25, pleaded to the same charges and is due to be sentenced in April. Jacques, 25, is awaiting trial.

The new church is under construction on the same spot where the other burned. It doesn't look it, Robinson said, but it is actually further along in construction than the other was at the time of the fire.

"We're connected with the water and sewer, and we have a power source. They're doing the insulation now," he said. "We're further along overall."

It's far enough along that Robinson can gesture with one hand to where the altar will be, and use both hands to trace out where the aisles will be once the flooring is installed.

The story of the new church is not about the fire, members of the congregation insist. It is about the rebuilding that took place afterward.

"It was like we lost a dear one," he said. "Especially when it was 75 percent complete and we could see it. It was no longer on paper; it was flesh and blood, so to speak, and it was snatched from us."

Among the parishioners, the charred wreckage could have been a symbol of anger, of bitterness, but it became a symbol of hope.

"I said early on that we may be delayed but we would not be denied. We were not going to let that heinous act be the final verdict," he said.

Rebuilding was not easy. The economy worsened, construction costs increased, and financing tightened.

The small Macedonia congregation was soon embraced by other churches, both locally and around the country, with prayer, volunteer labor and money. They still are, Robinson said.

The Rev. Robert Jenkins, an elder with the church, said from the first day after the fire, members of the church were looking forward. He gave credit to Robinson for setting the tone early by declaring the new church was merely delayed, not denied.

"We've always looked at it optimistically," Jenkins said. "We've never hung our heads."

Gladys Gaskin, a parishioner at Macedonia church, said she never doubted the resolve of the congregation to rebuild. Rather than thinking about the fire, she said she chooses to think about the outpouring of support that happened afterward.

"Even though it has been a long time to get to this point, we have been blessed because of all the people who came out to help," she said. "It says in the Scriptures 'We're helpers, one another.' And this proves it."