

Flint pastor builds laundromat to counter 'hygiene poverty'

by [Kate Stockrahm](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue



Leo Robinson III records a fundraising video in October 2020 for Good Laundry. (Video screengrab)

The nearest laundry facility to Good Church is technically just under three and a half miles away, but lead pastor Leo Robinson II rounds up.

After all, if most of your congregation in Flint, Michigan, relies on public transportation, three and a half miles might as well be four—or 30—when it comes to doing a load of laundry.

“Over 75 percent of our people in this area depend on public transportation, so you can only imagine taking all of your clothes, getting on the MTA to go to the laundromat to sit for three or four hours to do your laundry, and then come back on that bus route,” the Flint native said, standing in the church’s basement and soon-to-be affordable laundromat, Good Laundry. “That’s taking up most of your day.”

Before moving into the church building, Robinson and his wife, Mio Robinson, commissioned a study of the neighborhood so as to better understand the community Good Church planned to serve. That study is why Robinson can so readily talk about the neighborhood's demographics, socioeconomic position, and, in this case, relative distance to essential services.

Good Church is not yet two years old, but Robinson and his wife have already found themselves an integral part of their community.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Good Church participated in food distribution events at surrounding apartment complexes, and it was during that time that the couple learned of the area's need for a laundromat.

Robinson had never considered that a nearby, affordable laundry facility could be of greater importance than dinner, but he has since learned about "hygiene poverty"—the condition of being unable to afford hygiene products—and its effects on the Flint community.

"People are actually having to choose between clean clothes and basic needs," Robinson said, noting that common government assistance programs do not cover most hygiene supplies. "And that breaks my heart."

So, in an effort to help residents who make the choice between buying food or detergent each day, Robinson and his wife set to work on building a laundry facility in the church's basement. Now they're nearly ready to welcome folks in for Good Laundry's first spin cycles.

Studies connect limited access to clean clothes with reduced school attendance. In turn, that absenteeism can lead to lower numeracy and literacy rates, higher levels of suspension, and a higher likelihood of dropping out—all trends school representatives have talked about with Robinson since he began work on Good Laundry.

Though renovations for Good Laundry are nearing their final stages—water hookups are visible, and commercial-grade washers and dryers have been secured—Robinson said he's aware there are limitations on the impact his facility can have.

He and his wife calculated that between the number of machines and the facility's estimated hours of operation, having four washers and four dryers would equate to

supporting a little more than 100 families' laundry needs per week. Machines will likely need to be scheduled out to ensure equitable access.

"We thought we were just meeting the need," Robinson said of his learnings so far. "But it really became another business."

Robinson said that after accidentally creating a whole new enterprise, he decided to learn the laundry industry to manage it properly. However, he realized quickly that his aims for Good Laundry were not the same as most stand-alone laundry businesses.

"I almost got shut out of the laundromat conference because I'm the only one there that's not trying to make this huge profit," he said with a laugh. "I just want to open up a laundromat to help people. What's the cheapest way? And there's no table to talk with people about that."

Robinson said he wants to keep his laundry facility affordable for anyone who needs it, though it cannot be free because he has real costs to operate it.

"If I break even at the end of the day, I'm good," Robinson said of his goal for Good Laundry. "That's not the standard business model, but that's what we're doing."

In the meantime, Robinson and his wife are working continually to secure funding while thinking of other ways to make Good Laundry the best facility it can be for all who use it.

Alongside the laundry area, the Robinsons are converting another portion of the church basement into a space for Good Laundry guests to wait, relax, fold clothes, or hang out.

When asked if he'd do any preaching to Good Laundry guests, Robinson laughed and said no, only if they want to come upstairs to Good Church. "It doesn't have to be always churchy," he said.

"Spiritual health is awesome . . . but how can we get them to read the Bible if they can't read?" he continued. "The average reading level is eighth grade around here—let's work on that. We don't have to put a pulpit everywhere."

—*Flint Beat*. This story is part of the SoJo Exchange from the Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.