

*Beyond*  
**BELIEF**

Religion and Social Change in 1960s Chicago

# Sacred Ground, Contested City

Faith and Activism in 1960s Woodlawn and Hyde Park

**October 3, 2026**



Today we explore how religious communities responded to one of the most transformative periods in Chicago's history. Rather than telling a single story, this history invites us to encounter multiple visions of justice, community, and public life.

### **Faith**

How did religious belief shape public action?

### **Place**

How did neighborhoods influence what was possible?

### **Power**

Who decided the future of these communities?

### **Community**

How were people brought together—or divided?

## Chicago in 1960

### Population: 3.5 million people

- 23% Black or African American
- 76% White
- 1% Asian and Other Races
- The 1960 census did not track a Hispanic or Latino category

## Chicago in 1970

### Population: 3.4 million people

- 32% Black or African American
- 61% White
- 7% Hispanic or Latino
- 2% Asian and Other Races

During the Great Migration, hundreds of thousands of Black Americans moved to Chicago to escape Southern Jim Crow laws and find industrial jobs. Upon arrival, discrimination, redlining, and racially restrictive covenants strictly confined them to a narrow, overcrowded South Side enclave known as the “Black Belt” (later Bronzeville). When the US Supreme Court ruled restrictive covenants unenforceable in 1948, the expanding population pushed south into neighboring areas, where local faith communities played powerful, conflicting roles:

- **Woodlawn** experienced a rapid demographic transition as white residents fled and predatory landlords carved buildings into cramped, high-rent apartments. While some white congregations chose to relocate to the suburbs, others actively chose to stay and integrate—most notably First Presbyterian Church, which integrated in 1954. By 1960, Black clergy, local residents, and community organizers united to fiercely protest substandard housing, fight slum landlords, and block predatory displacement.
- **Hyde Park** faced intense institutional resistance led by the University of Chicago, which spent thousands of dollars enforcing segregation prior to 1948. When legal covenants fell, the university pioneered aggressive “urban renewal” programs, demolishing cheaper housing to price out low-income Black migrants. Local religious institutions split sharply over this strategy: several affluent white churches and synagogues backed the university’s South East Chicago Commission (SECC) to maintain an exclusive socioeconomic enclave, while a progressive coalition of interfaith leaders, including members of local Reform Jewish synagogues and the University’s own Rockefeller Memorial Chapel fought alongside Black organizers for open housing and equitable integration.

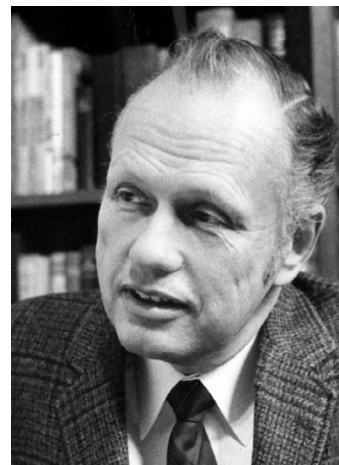
Following the 1948 Supreme Court ruling striking down racially restrictive covenants, the University of Chicago pivoted from legally enforcing segregation to aggressively funding “urban renewal” programs—using eminent domain and real estate management to control neighborhood integration on the South Side. As local battles over this displacement intensified, the campus became a flashpoint for intense student activism.

During these 1960s integration fights, **Rockefeller Memorial Chapel** navigated intense clashes between student activists and the university administration under the leadership of two key figures. **The Rev. E. Spencer Parsons**, as Dean, used his pulpit for progressive advocacy but famously opposed amnesty for student protesters, arguing that true civil disobedience requires accepting disciplinary consequences.

Meanwhile, **The Rev. Dr. Bernard “Bernie” Owen Brown** served as a vital pastoral bridge, focusing on grassroots community building and social ethics to support a diverse student body amidst the turbulent local civil rights movement. Together, they made the chapel a space that championed progressive ideas while upholding strict institutional boundaries.

Rockefeller Memorial Chapel hosted speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr three times, in April 1956, February 1959, and April 1966.

**The Rev. Dr. Bernard  
“Bernie” Owen Brown  
served in various  
positions at the  
University of Chicago  
from 1963 until 1995.**



**The Rev. E. Spencer Parsons was Dean  
of Rockefeller Memorial Chapel from  
1965 to 1978.**



**Rockefeller Memorial Chapel on the campus of the University of Chicago**

During the 1950s, as the Woodlawn neighborhood experienced a rapid demographic shift with the arrival of large numbers of Black families, **First Presbyterian Church of Chicago** resisted the trend of “white flight” and instead committed to radical racial integration under the guidance of Dr. Harold Leonard Bowman.

Following Bowman’s retirement in 1956, the church appointed the nation’s first interracial co-pastoral team: the **Rev. Ulysses B. “Buck” Blakely** and the **Rev. Charles T. “Chuck” Leber Jr.** This duo immersed the church in grassroots neighborhood activism, famously partnering with organizer Saul Alinsky to form The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) in 1960 to secure economic and political self-determination for South Side residents.

In 1964, the **Rev. John R. Fry** led First Church through a highly controversial and progressive engagement with the era’s social change movements. Rather than avoiding the neighborhood’s complex dynamics, Fry embraced the Blackstone Rangers, a powerful South Side Black youth gang, viewing them as a well-organized source of Black power capable of community leadership. Under his guidance, the church served as a community center for the group, hosting federally funded job training initiatives via TWO and providing a safe space where members could check their weapons. While credited with successfully dampening local race riots in 1966, Fry’s approach drew backlash from the Chicago Police Department and ultimately led to his interrogation before a US Senate subcommittee in 1968 over allegations of enabling gang violence. The charges were ultimately found to be without merit.



Left to right, the Rev. Dr. Harold Leonard Bowman, The Rev. Charles T. Leber Jr, and the Rev. Ulysses B. Blakely. Rev. Bowman was senior pastor for 24 years and led successful integration efforts at the church. Upon his retirement in 1956 he was replaced by the Revs. Leber and Blakely, known affectionately to the community as “Buck and Chuck.”



The cloister at First Presbyterian.



The controversial Rev. John R. Fry served as First Church pastor from 1964 through 1971.



First Presbyterian Church, which opened in 1928.





**Woodlawn Cleanup event organized by the Blackstone Ranges on August 4, 1968 in the 600 block of South Kenwood.**



**Homes being demolished for University of Chicago urban renewal project, 1960s.**



**In April 1968 members of the Blackstone Rangers march along 63rd Street to a meeting with the rival East Side Disciples gang on the grassy mall of the Midway Plaisance, where they agreed to a truce.**

Under the dynamic leadership of **The Rev. (later Bishop) Arthur M. Brazier** from 1960 until his retirement in 2008, the **Apostolic Church of God** transformed from a small congregation of about 100 people into a megachurch with over 20,000 members. Bishop Brazier used his platform to become a towering figure in Chicago's civil rights history, directly blending faith with aggressive grassroots activism. Working with legendary community organizer **Saul Alinsky**, as well as the pastors of First Presbyterian Church, to found The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) in the early 1960s, Bishop Brazier successfully organized South Side residents to demand tenant rights, fight discriminatory real estate practices, and block the University of Chicago from displacing local families during its campus expansion. Alinsky's rigorous training transformed Bishop Brazier from a soft-spoken former mail carrier into a formidable, "hard-nosed" tactician capable of mobilizing thousands of Black residents for historic voter registration drives and neighborhood-led urban renewal.

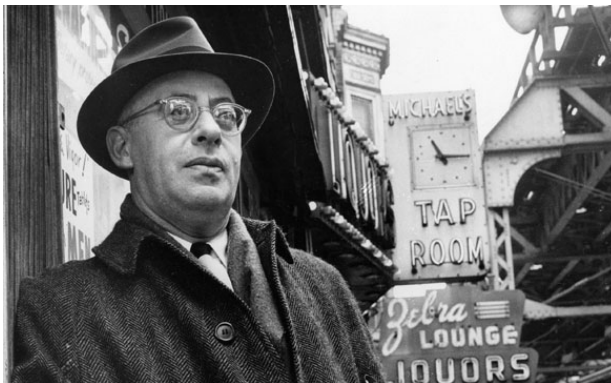
Bishop Brazier's localized social change movements quickly expanded to national prominence when he allied with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Chicago Freedom Movement of 1966. He was instrumental in bringing Dr. King to the city to protest systemic housing segregation, unfair education boundaries, and job discrimination, famously helping to coordinate a massive rally of tens of thousands at Soldier Field, combining street-level organizational strategies with the immense congregation, spiritual authority, and structural resources of the Apostolic Church of God.



**The current Christian Temple Baptist Church, site of Apostolic Church of God in the 1960s.**



**The Apostolic Church of God today; the complex was built in 1992.**



**Influential activist and organizer Sal Alinsky.**



**Then Rev. (later Bishop) Arthur M. Brazier, pastor of Apostolic Church of God from 1960 to 2008.**

The history of **KAM Isaiah Israel** began with the founding of Chicago's earliest Jewish institutions: Kehilath Anshe Ma'arav (KAM), established in 1847 as Illinois' oldest synagogue, and Temple Isaiah Israel, which traced its origins back to an 1852 breakaway congregation called B'nai Sholom. Over the next several decades, both Reform congregations migrated south from downtown alongside Chicago's shifting Jewish population, eventually settling in the Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood. Throughout the turbulent 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by rapid demographic shifts and widespread "white flight" to the suburbs, both KAM and Isaiah Israel made a conscious, principled choice to remain rooted in the South Side.

Under the dedicated leadership of Rabbis **Jacob J. Weinstein** of KAM and **Hayim Goren Perelmutter** of Isaiah Israel, the congregations actively resisted suburban relocation, choosing instead to focus their spiritual energy on local racial integration and social change. They became progressive pillars of the Hyde Park community, championing civil rights, advocating for fair housing, and transforming their spaces into active hubs for social action and interfaith collaboration. Rabbi Weinstein became a close friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and KAM hosted him before a capacity crowd in 1966.

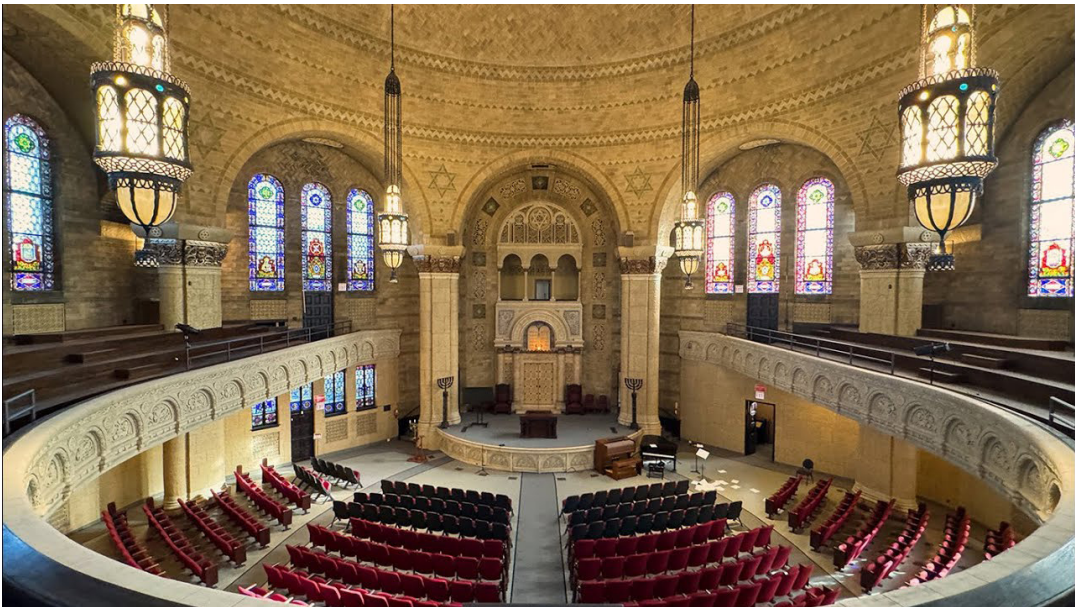
This shared, deeply held commitment to urban social justice laid the groundwork for the two historic congregations to officially merge in 1971, anchoring their combined legacy in the historic Byzantine Revival synagogue on Hyde Park Boulevard.



**Rabbi Jacob Weinstein became rabbi of KAM in Chicago in 1939 and served until its merger with Temple Isaiah Israel in 1971.**



**KAM Isaiah Israel, dedicated in 1924 for Temple Isaiah.**



**Interior of the KAM Isaiah Israel Temple.**



The Newberry Library's initiative, *Beyond Belief: Religion and Social Change in 1960s Chicago*, which runs through 2029, explores how religion—often overlooked in stories of social change—has played a vital role in shaping movements for justice, equity, and community in Chicago. By uncovering these connections, *Beyond Belief* helps us better understand the city's past and inspires deeper, more inclusive conversations about the forces that continue to shape our world today.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Chicago region experienced successive waves of immigration: Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Europe; migrating African American and Latino/a families; Arab refugees; and relocated Native Americans. Each new population faced discrimination, oppression, and injustice, and all fought and continue to struggle to achieve political, social, and economic opportunity. In each community, religions played instrumental roles in collective struggles for equality and justice, with churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques often promoting and sometimes resisting social and political change.

We tend to examine these movements in isolation, without exploring connections and continuities. This project considers them holistically rather than as separate phenomena. We focus on the 1960s as a pivotal point across communities, while placing societal shifts within historical context. The initiative brings together stories, public events, oral histories, exhibits, and teaching tools to help diverse audiences throughout the region see our history in new ways and connect it to issues we still face.

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**[newberry.org/beyond-belief](https://newberry.org/beyond-belief)  
[belief@newberry.org](mailto:belief@newberry.org)**