

All of Mankind Mural

617 W. Evergreen Street, Chicago



All of Mankind Mural by William Walker (1972) at San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Photo credit: Ryan Patrick Clarke

OVERVIEW

In 1971, a progressive priest commissioned Chicago artist William Walker to paint a series of murals at San Marcello Mission/Stranger's Home Missionary Church. Surrounded by the towers of the Cabrini-Green homes, Stranger's Home Missionary Church served as a center of religious life for African American families on the Near North Side. The murals, collectively titled *All of Mankind*, explored the beauty and struggle of Black America and envisioned a world united. The piece was widely regarded as one of Walker's masterpieces and became a symbol of Cabrini-Green.

All of Mankind Mural / San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church

All of Mankind: The Unity of the Human Race

Artist: **William Walker**

Date: **1971-1974**

Style: **Black Arts Movement**

San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church

Architect: **John Neal Tilton**

Year: **1901**

Style: **Gothic Revival**

Address: **617 W. Evergreen**

Neighborhood: **Near North Side**



All of Mankind Mural by William Walker (1972) at San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Photo credit: Debbie Mercer

The church was built in 1901 by the Episcopal congregation of the St. John the Evangelist. In 1927, it became San Marcello Mission Church and served a community of Italian immigrants.

The Cabrini-Green homes were mostly demolished by 2011, but Stranger's Home Missionary Church remained standing. Unfortunately, Walker's murals were whitewashed by 2016 in an effort to prepare the building for sale. It is believed that these works are salvageable. A coalition of art conservators, community organizations and residents are pursuing funding and city support for the purchase and restoration of the church and its murals through a coalition called the Cabrini Art House Project. They believe that the site can become a center for a revised Cabrini community, and Walker's restored murals a neighborhood landmark.

HISTORY

In 1900, the Episcopal congregation of St. John the Evangelist announced the purchase of a plot of land at the corner of Rees and Vine Street for the construction of a "chapel, club quarters, and apartments for the pastors in charge." A year later in 1901, construction of the church began based on plans by architect John Neal Tilton .



Site of All of Mankind Mural by William Walker (1972) at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church / San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Historic photo credit: John Neal Tilton. Item #3407. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

As early as 1917, St. John the Evangelist was noted as one of the many congregations serving the city's large Italian population, which had swelled over the decades following the church's construction. Growing from 16,000 in 1900 to nearly 74,000 by 1930, the largest concentration of this immigrant population was centered on the Near West Side, with a sizable Italian community settling in the area around the church. In 1927, St. John the Evangelist was sold to the Archdiocese of Chicago and became San Marcello Mission Church which continued to serve the neighborhood's expanding Italian American community.

However, the following decades saw the movement of Italians and other ethnic groups out of Chicago's urban core, including the San Marcello area. This geographic shift was partially driven by unsafe housing conditions in comparison to the more comfortable accommodations found in residential parts of the city and suburbs.

To combat poor housing, in 1941 the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) demolished homes in the vicinity of Chicago and Cambridge Avenues and extending north and eastward to clear the land for the Cabrini Homes. Named for Saint Frances Cabrini, this early development was home to a sizable mix of Italian and Black families.



All of Mankind Mural by William Walker (1972) at San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Photo credit: Chicago Public Art Group

Over the next two decades more than twenty mid-rise and high-rise buildings were added as far north as Clybourn and as far west as Halsted, and the Cabrini homes grew into the Cabrini-Green public housing complex. By the 1960s the development primarily housed a multi-denominational community of Black families while the presence of the Italian community dwindled. With the 1962 completion of the William Green Homes, San Marcello Mission Church was absorbed by the large housing development and promptly closed.

In 1971, Father Dennis Kendrick, a priest at nearby St. Joseph's Church successfully lobbied the Archdiocese to reopen the church as a resource for the Cabrini-Green community. Kendrick, a known progressive figure in the area, commissioned local muralist William Walker to create a series of paintings on the church's façade and interior.

Today, Walker is considered one of Chicago's most consequential artists. He was a central figure in the development of the 1960s mural movement in Chicago, which artistically captured the beauty and struggle of the Black experience. Walker was one of the founders of the Organization for Black American Culture (OBAC) collective and was a guiding force alongside artist and activist Sylvia Abernathy, in the creation of the Wall of Respect in 1967, a pivotal moment in art history. Wall of Respect was mural celebrating icons of Black history and culture painted by OBAC on the side of a Bronzeville building at 43rd and Langley. Walker referred to the mural in a Chicago Daily News interview as "the ghetto's answer to the Picasso." Wall of Respect sparked a nationwide movement of similar large-scale cultural murals and cemented Chicago as a center of muralist art as well as the Black Arts Movement. Walker went on to found the Chicago Mural Group (today, Chicago Public Art Group) and at one point had murals in Nashville, Memphis, and Detroit.

Chicago 7: *All of Mankind: The Unity of the Human Race* Mural

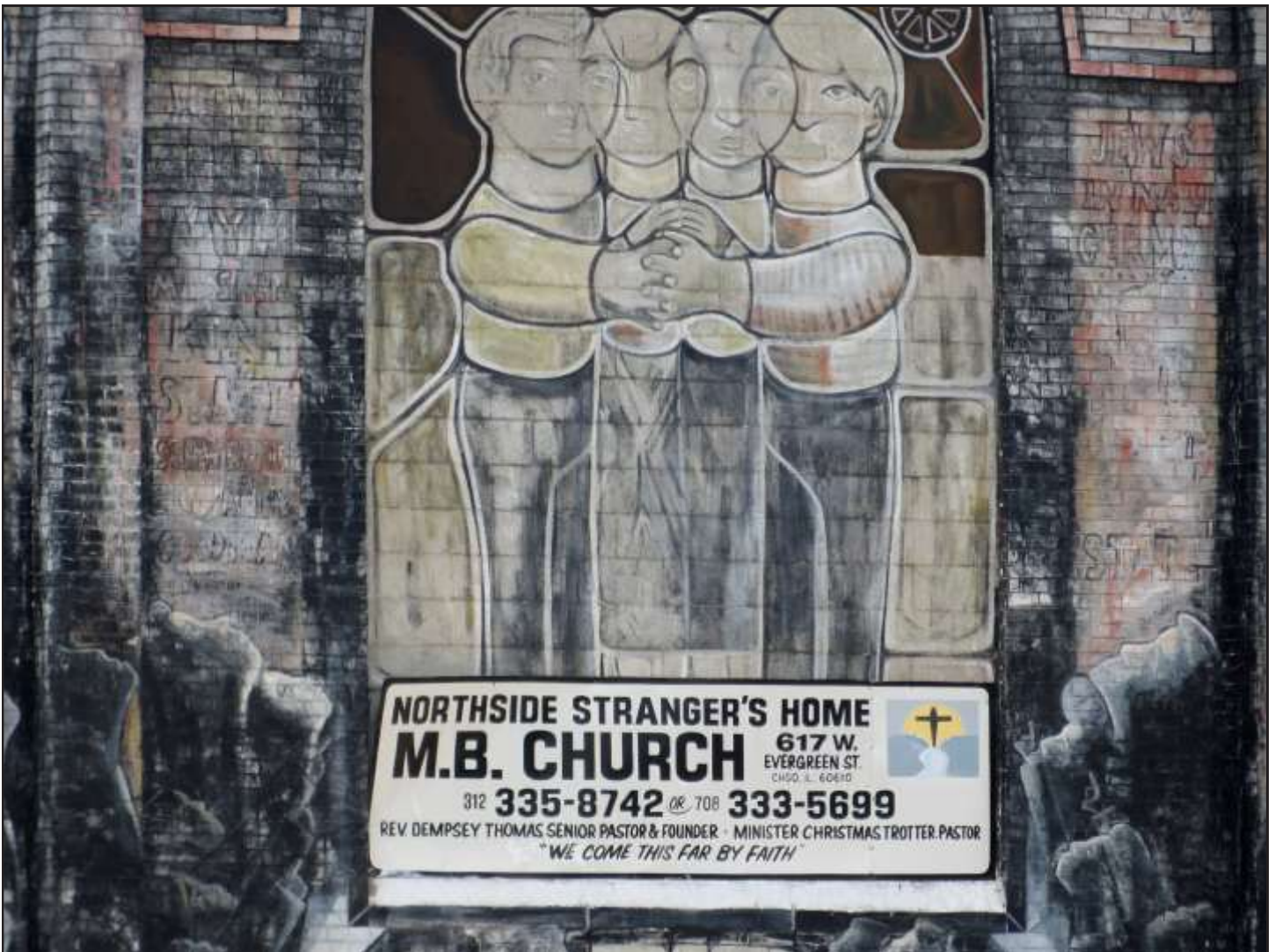


All of Mankind Mural by William Walker (1972) at San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Photo credit: Debbie Mercer

Walker commenced work on the series of murals at San Marcello in 1971 titling it *All of Mankind: The Unity of the Human Race*. The most prominent section was painted on the north elevation of the church. It depicts four figures of varied races and genders with intertwined hands; above them, the words “Why were they all crucified” and the names of various martyrs including Jesus Christ, Anne Frank, Malcom X, “Dr. King,” and Emmett Till. The mural also invokes the names of the My Lai and Kent State Massacres, among other acts of mass violence.

On the church’s interior back wall, Walker painted a floor-to-ceiling mural depicting images of Black families, community, and industry, while on either side of the altar, Walker celebrated Black motherhood and fatherhood. The scale and beauty of these murals led to the church earning the nickname of “Chicago’s Sistine Chapel.”

Father Kendrick’s progressive politics resulted in his removal by the Archdiocese and the end of his protection over the church. The building was sold in January 1974 to a Black Baptist congregation and renamed Stranger’s Home Missionary Baptist Church. For decades after the church became Stranger’s Home, the structure and Walker’s striking murals served as a visual landmark in the Cabrini-Green Homes. Despite their artistic and cultural



All of Mankind Mural by William Walker (1972) at San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Photo credit: Debbie Mercer

significance, the church whitewashed the interior murals in 2004. Seven years later Stranger's Home was left with a greatly reduced congregation after the demolition of the high-rises that surrounded the church was completed. The façade—the only remaining portion of Walker's mural—was whitewashed in 2016 to aid in the building's sale later that year. Prior to the exterior murals being white-washed and building sold, Walker had returned to restore them. The building has been vacant since the 2016 sale, although it has occasionally been used as a filming location, most recently for the 2021 movie *Candyman*.

Today, only a few William Walker murals remain in Chicago. Works like *History of the Packing House Worker* (1975) at 4859 S. Wabash and *Childhood Without Prejudice* (1977) at 56th Street and Stony Island have been restored, but many more have been lost to demolition or defacement. Although painted over, *All of Mankind* is now considered a significant mural by an important Chicago artist.

THREAT

The whitewashing of *All of Mankind* has obscured Walker's work, but it is believed the murals still exist underneath layers of paint. A coalition of local community organizations, art conservators, neighborhood residents, as well as the Chicago Public Arts Group has in recent years pursued fundraising opportunities to both purchase the church and restore Walker's murals. Limited access to the site has made it difficult to ascertain the murals'



Whitewashed All of Mankind Mural by William Walker (1972) at San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Photo credit: Corcoran Urban Real Estate

condition but initial assessments indicate it may be possible to restore them. The coalition is not only interested in restoration of the murals, but also redevelopment of the property into a center that supports the local community and remaining Cabrini-Green residents.

The current owner has not listed the property for sale, but has reportedly signaled that he is open to offers. The church structure constitutes the full extent of the property; any surrounding land is owned by the Chicago Housing Authority, making independent redevelopment of the property much more difficult. As CHA continues to sell off parcels of the former Cabrini-Green Homes, it is likely that the building will one day be targeted for demolition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Thanks to the efforts of this dedicated coalition, preservation and restoration of *All of Mankind* and San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church is feasible — but a few pieces are still missing. Increased funding will be crucial to this effort. The coalition is seeking funding opportunities that will facilitate the site's acquisition and the murals' assessment and restoration. The site touches on many important themes—Black history, mural art, and public housing foremost among them—that could certainly attract funding from preservation-, art-, and history-focused organizations.

Collaboration with the City of Chicago will also be necessary during this process. The involvement of various agencies, including Chicago Housing Authority and the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) will be required to ensure redevelopment is provided every resource needed to succeed, including potential incorporation with future developments on adjacent CHA-owned land. Guided by this devoted coalition and with the aid of the city, the restoration of this church and its murals could become a moment of rebirth and resilience for a community heavily affected by demolition, disinvestment, and the traumas of urban renewal.



Black Family, Community and Industry, Black Motherhood, and Black Fatherhood interior murals by William Walker (1972) prior to overpainting at San Marcello Mission Church / Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church, 1901, John Neal Tilton, 617 W. Evergreen Avenue. Photo credit: Jeff Heubner