

Calvary Baptist Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Calvary Baptist Church

Other names/site number: N/A

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing):

2. Location

Street & number: 2959 North Teutonia Avenue

City or town: Milwaukee **State:** WI **County:** Milwaukee

Not For Publication: ☐ **Vicinity:** ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ☐ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following

level(s) of significance: ☐ **National** ☐ **Statewide** ☒ **Local**

Applicable National Register Criteria ☐ **A** ☐ **B** ☒ **C** ☐ **D**

Signature of certifying official/Title:	Date
Tricia Canaday, Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Officer	
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	
In my opinion, the property <input type="checkbox"/> meets <input type="checkbox"/> does not meet the National Register criteria.	
Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title:	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ Entered in the National Register
- ☐ Determined eligible for the National Register
- ☐ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- ☐ Removed from the National Register
- ☐ Other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

Private: ☒
Public – Local ☐
Public – State ☐
Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

Building(s) ☒
District ☐
Site ☐
Structure ☐
Object ☐

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use
Historic Functions**Current Functions**

RELIGION / religious facility

RELIGION / religious facility

7. Description**Architectural Classification**

MODERN MOVEMENT

Materials:

Principal exterior materials of the property: Walls: BRICK; roof: ASPHALT

Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

Calvary Baptist Church was constructed in 1971 following a design by architect William Wenzler. Representing a unique combination of the Neo-Expressionism style and traditional African building forms, the church has a low, irregular shape with tent-like roofs and uneven wall heights. The church's two buildings huddle together, evoking a small village or a traditional clan compound; and its gently spread roof forms low peaks, sheltering the walls with gracefully sweeping eaves.¹ The building is in good condition and retains integrity. The nominated property includes one contributing resource (the church).

Setting

Calvary Baptist Church is located in the North Division neighborhood in the city of Milwaukee, approximately three miles northwest of the central business district. The church is located along North Teutonia Avenue, one of the city's diagonal arterial streets that radiate out from downtown. Teutonia Avenue is a two-lane urban roadway with parking and sidewalks along both

¹ This poetic description is quoted from the late architectural historian Paul Jakubovich, who contributed the essay on Calvary Baptist Church to the Society of Architectural Historians' *Buildings of Wisconsin*. Quoted in the Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory, "Calvary Baptist Church," AHI record number 56584, 2959 N. Teutonia Ave., Milwaukee, Milwaukee County.

sides. In the blocks surrounding Calvary, Teutonia Avenue is lined with one- and two-story mixed use commercial buildings, houses, and duplexes. Most of these buildings date to the 1920s. The street was once densely developed; however, similar to many of Milwaukee's African American neighborhoods, decades of disinvestment, unemployment, and neglect have led to much demolition, resulting in numerous vacant lots. In Calvary's block, south of the church there are a Period Revival-style commercial building, a two-story duplex, and several one and one-half story houses interspersed with vacant lots. West of the church property is a large multistory apartment building. Across Teutonia Avenue from the church, the opposite side of the street contains a fenced and gated surface parking lot, flanked by a Queen Anne-style duplex at the south corner of the block and two early-twentieth-century commercial buildings at the north end.

Landscape (*Photos 1-4, 7, 8*)

Calvary Baptist Church is located on corner parcel at the southwest corner of North Teutonia Avenue and West Chambers Street. The building is oriented roughly parallel to Teutonia Avenue and is set back approximately twenty feet from the roadway. The east (front) side of the property contains a sloped, semicircular drive that rises to the level of the entry narthex. Situated in the grassy slope inside the curve of the drive are a flight of concrete stairs, lined with square metal balusters and wide wood handrails, that provide pedestrian access from the sidewalk to the entry of the church. A metal signboard is located on the grassy slope north of the stairs, and the stairs are flanked on both sides by mature locust trees. Because of its relatively small size and scale, the signboard is not included in the property's resource count but is considered to be an element of the overall setting. Additional mature trees are located in the grass areas north of the church. The western portion of the property contains a large paved parking lot. The landscaped area between the parking lot and the west elevation and entrance to the church contains lawn, flowerbeds, and a mature tree. A curving sidewalk provides entrance to the church and mirrors the curve of its exterior wall. The property is bounded by a security fence on the north, west, and south sides; a vehicular access gate on the north, along Chambers Street, provides access to the driveway and parking lot. A secondary curved driveway is located at the south edge of the property, south of the fellowship hall, and connects the Teutonia Avenue entry drive to the western parking lot.

Exterior

Calvary Baptist Church is a Neo-Expressionist-style building. It is roughly figure eight-shaped in plan and consists of a polygonal sanctuary and a polygonal fellowship hall connected by a narthex hyphen containing office, service, and circulation space. The building is clad in brown brick laid in running bond and has shallow-pitched roofs with deep overhangs. The church's primary exterior character-defining features include the faceted polygonal masses of the sanctuary and fellowship hall; the concave curves of the exterior narthex walls; and the sweeping roofline with its deep overhangs. Unless otherwise noted, all exterior elements, including doors and windows, are original.

East Elevation (Photos 1-3, 5)

The east elevation of Calvary Baptist Church faces Teutonia Avenue and consists of the three distinct building masses (from south to north) of the fellowship hall, the narthex entry, and the

sanctuary. The fellowship hall is clad in brick and is polygonal in plan. Each wall plane is uneven in height, creating an irregular roofline that dips and rises around the perimeter of the fellowship hall. The fellowship hall is capped with a low-pitched, asphalt shingled roof. The roof has deep overhangs with painted metal fascia and painted glue-laminated beams. Originally, the tails of the beams extended even further past the deep overhang; however, by 2020 they were badly deteriorated and were removed to prevent further structural damage to the roof. The deep overhangs of the roof conceal a band of clerestory windows, not visible from the exterior. The clerestory band consists of thin strips of fixed-light windows located in the space formed by the deep glue-laminated beams between the top of the wall and the ceiling. The east elevation of the fellowship hall does not contain any other visible fenestration.

The central narthex entry is located between the building masses of the fellowship hall and the sanctuary. In plan, the east (front) wall of the narthex is a gentle concave curve and the side walls angle back to meet the exterior walls of the fellowship hall and sanctuary. The outer front corners of the narthex consist of brick panels. A projecting vestibule is located in the center of the elevation. The loadbearing frame of the vestibule is pulled back into the interior of the building, allowing the exterior wall to be free of any large structural elements. The exterior of the vestibule contains a pair of aluminum-framed glass doors set into a painted wood frame. The remainder of the vestibule contains full-height, single pane sheet glass walls with a metal-clad base. The glass meets at the vertical corners without any structural elements and follows the shape of each opening with simple rectangular stops. Similar full-height sheet glass is located at the rear corners where the vestibule meets the walls of the fellowship hall and the sanctuary. The narthex has a shallow-pitched roof with a moderate overhang and exposed rafter rails.

The northern part of the east elevation contains the sanctuary. The sanctuary, like the fellowship hall, is polygonal in plan and clad in brick. However, unlike the fellowship hall, the sanctuary has an exposed basement story that is partially hidden by the raised entry driveway. The basement story contains paired segmental-arched openings with brick sailor course sills and lintels. Each opening contains paired aluminum casement windows. The upper story, corresponding to the sanctuary inside, contains tall, thin, arched slit openings with brick sills and lintels. Each slit opening has an interior wooden shutter panel that can be opened for ventilation. The east walls of the sanctuary have a consistent height, resulting in an even roofline. Like the fellowship hall, the low-pitched, asphalt shingled sanctuary roof has a deep overhang with concealed clerestory windows between the glue-laminated roof beams. The sanctuary also originally contained projecting rafter tails that were badly deteriorated and were subsequently removed. The sanctuary roof is capped with a polygonal light scoop that directs sunlight into the sanctuary beneath. The four east-facing sides of the light scoop are glass and are framed on the sides and top by the exposed metal-clad roof beams.

North Elevation (Photo 6)

The north elevation consists of the northern part of the polygonal sanctuary. Like the east side of the sanctuary, the north elevation has an exposed basement story with paired aluminum casement windows set into segmental-arched openings. Two egress doors are located at the half-level between the basement and the sanctuary. Each door is a plain steel door with a painted wood transom set into a segment-arched opening. Each door is connected to the surrounding landscape berm by a concrete slab walkway with square metal balusters and rectangular painted wood

handrails. The upper edges of the north walls of the sanctuary are uneven in height, creating an undulating roofline. The roof is identical to the rest of the sanctuary building mass, with deep overhangs and exposed rafter tails. At the peak of the roof, the light scoop is visible in profile and is dramatically angled upwards towards the east.

West Elevation (Photos 7 and 8)

The west elevation contains (from north to south) the sanctuary building mass, the lower one-story office portion, and the fellowship hall building mass. The entire west elevation is located at the same grade as the adjacent parking lot and is separated from the parking by a concrete sidewalk and landscaped area with grass and a mature tree. The west elevation of the polygonal sanctuary lacks any visible windows and is similar to the other elevations: brick walls, hidden clerestory windows, uneven wall heights, and an undulating roofline with deep overhangs. The roof planes are more steeply pitched on this elevation and rise up to form the back of the east-facing light scoop.

The central office portion is gently concave in plan and similar in materials and detailing to the narthex entry on the east elevation. A recessed entry vestibule is located in the northern half of the elevation. Like the narthex entry, this vestibule has a pair of aluminum-framed glass doors set into a wood frame. The entry doors are surrounded by sheet glass walls with metal-clad bases and minimal wood frames. The southern half of the office elevation contains a pair of sheet glass windows and a single sheet glass window, both corresponding to offices inside. A gridded metal vent is located at the southern end of the west elevation wall. The elevation is capped with a low pitched roof with a moderate overhang and exposed rafter tails.

The building mass of the fellowship hall is partially covered by the office wing. Like the east elevation of the fellowship hall, this portion has blank brick walls, a hidden clerestory beneath deep overhangs, irregular wall heights, and an uneven roofline. The fellowship hall roof is also capped by a light scoop. The fellowship hall light scoop is west-facing and is lower and less prominent than the sanctuary. Like that on the sanctuary, it contains glass in its western faces and is framed by the exposed roof beams.

South Elevation

The south elevation consists of the lower office wing and the taller building mass of the fellowship hall. The office wing contains a steel exit door; the remainder of the elevation is blank. The south end of the polygonal fellowship hall is similar to its other sides, with blank brick walls, hidden clerestory windows, deep overhangs, and an undulating roofline.

Interior

The interior of Calvary Baptist Church contains the large primary spaces of the sanctuary and the fellowship hall. The narthex forms an intermediate space between the two large spaces, as well as providing corridor and staircase access to various offices, classrooms, toilet rooms, and other service areas. The interior spaces are arranged on four staggered levels. The sanctuary and east narthex entry are the highest, at the location of the raised drive along Teutonia Avenue. The fellowship hall and office portion of the narthex are down a half-level, at the grade of the western parking lot. Classrooms, restrooms, and a chapel are located another half-level down, beneath the sanctuary. And lowest of all, a fully subterranean basement (another half-level beneath the

classrooms) contains a furnace room and storage and is located under the office wing. Primary character-defining features of the interior include the distinctive arrangement of sanctuary, fellowship hall, lower level classrooms and chapel, and circulation space; the expressive spatial volumes of the sanctuary and fellowship; exposed structural roof beams; and original materials and finishes including brick and painted concrete block walls, sheet glass interior windows, and linoleum and carpet flooring.

Sanctuary (Photos 9-11)

The sanctuary is roughly shell-shaped in plan and has a carpeted floor, painted concrete block walls, exposed glue-laminated beams, and tongue-and-groove board ceiling with tubular frosted glass lights. Near the center of the ceiling, the light scoop brings indirect daylight into the sanctuary space. The chancel is located at the west end of the space and is raised up one step. The original raised baptismal pool is located at the south end of the chancel; the pool has curved walls of stack bond brick capped with metal railings. A curved lectern of similar brick is located next to the baptismal pool. The original pulpit matches the lectern and is located on the opposite side of the chancel. Between the two is an altar table that was installed around 2005. An audio visual room forms the rear of the chancel. This room has drywall walls and wide wood trim; inside it contains equipment and storage. A staircase located at the rear of the chancel leads to the lower level. The main part of the sanctuary contains pew seating, several rows of which have been removed to accommodate a new audiovisual station.

The sanctuary is a dynamic space due in part to its architectural elements. A prominent glue-laminated parabolic arch stretches across the northern portion of the space and frames the chancel. The roof beams splay out from this arch and rest on the perimeter walls; and the curvature of the arch, combined with the uneven wall heights, creates a tent-like ceiling that seems to drape above the sanctuary. The arrangement of the pews intentionally avoids a symmetrical center axis. Even the entrance to the sanctuary avoids traditional symmetry or axial organization. Instead, worshipers enter the space from the west side of the southwest corner and turn to enter the main part of the sanctuary.

Fellowship Hall (Photo 12)

Like the sanctuary, the fellowship hall has concrete block walls (unpainted, unlike the painted block in the sanctuary), original hanging frosted glass tubular lights and a large glue-laminated arch (running north-to-south) that supports the roof beams. The fellowship hall has a linoleum floor and its south wall is lined with waist-height HVAC units. The north portion of the fellowship hall contains a row of square structural columns, each supporting a roof beam. North of the columns, the space is partitioned into a kitchen and smaller service rooms. These spaces have standard eight-foot-tall drywall walls, and the space between the walls and the soaring ceiling is filled with large sheet glass in wood frames.

Narthex (Photos 13-17)

The narthex is a large gathering space that spans the full depth of the building. The narthex contains two floor levels: the upper level, corresponding to the entry drive and the sanctuary, and the lower level, corresponding to the parking lot and fellowship hall. The two levels are connected by a switchback concrete staircase with original square metal balusters and a wide wooden handrail, and the staircase continues downward to access the classrooms beneath the

sanctuary as well as the basement furnace room. The narthex has a carpeted floor, exposed roof beams, and a tongue-and-groove board ceiling. The narthex has brick walls, several of which are located at odd angles corresponding to the sanctuary or fellowship hall spaces. The upper level of the narthex leads to a pair of glass doors that access the sanctuary.

The lower level of the narthex leads to a large library room on the north and congregation offices on the south. The library has solid panel wood doors with large sheet glass windows above. The south wall of the narthex contains a reception area with a built-in counter, a wood framed reception window, and tall sheet glass panels that meet at the corners without a structural frame. Inside the reception area, the walls are painted concrete block and drywall with wood cove lighting. These materials, along with the original wood ceiling, continue into the offices south of the reception area.

Classrooms (Photo 18)

The classrooms, located beneath the sanctuary on either side of a double-loaded corridor, have their original carpeted floors, painted concrete block and drywall walls, wide wood trim, and concrete ceilings. The classrooms on the south side of the corridor contain an accordion room divider that allows several classrooms to be connected into one larger space.

Chapel (Photo 19)

The chapel is a small wedge-shaped room located in the exposed basement directly beneath the chancel. The north and south walls are of concrete block, and the east and west (side) walls are drywall with wood cove lighting. Two arched windows are located in the north (rear) wall, and the south (front) wall retains its original floating polished tubular aluminum cross.

Integrity

Calvary Baptist Church is in good condition and retains integrity with only minimal changes to its original design, materials, and workmanship and no substantial changes to its location, setting, feeling, or association. The building has not had any additions to its original form, and the character-defining sculptural forms of the building's three masses remain intact and legible from both the exterior and interior. Although the mature trees were not present when the building was constructed in 1971, the urban setting and landscape elements (pedestrian stairs, entry drive, parking lot and sidewalk) remain unchanged. The church retains its original windows, doors, and exterior railings; and inside, it retains all of its original character-defining layout and arrangement of spaces, as well as most of its original materials and finishes including painted concrete block walls, wood ceilings, carpeted floors, and large sheet glass partitions. Alterations to the interior are minimal and consist of changes to the sanctuary furniture (the removal of several pews and the addition of a new movable altar table, installed around 2005) and upgrades to kitchen equipment (but not the overall kitchen layout) in the mid-2010s.

The most substantial alteration to the building was the removal of the original exposed beam tails in 2020. Originally designed by the building's architect to evoke the lashed bamboo roof structure of traditional buildings in Cameroon, the glue-laminated beam tails were poorly detailed and had become severely deteriorated by water exposure. Because there was no way to replace the exposed beam tails without replacing the entire beam structure, the exposed tails were removed in order to avoid further damage to the roof structures. Although the loss of the

projecting beams has somewhat altered the design of the roof edge, the roofs retain their overall original shape and sweeping overhangs. In addition, although they are now flush with the metal fascia at the edge of the overhang, the blocky beams still remain visible and provide a rhythm to the undulating roof edges.

END OF DESCRIPTION, DO NOT DELETE

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- ☐ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

- ☒ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance	Significant Person
ARCHITECTURE	N/A
Period of Significance	Cultural Affiliation
1971	N/A
Significant Dates	Architect/Builder
1971	William Wenzler & Associates (architect)
	Herbert Jaeger & Assoc., Inc. (contractor)

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

Calvary Baptist Church was constructed in 1971 for Milwaukee's oldest African American Baptist congregation. The church was designed by architect William Wenzler during a time of growing interest in African culture and history. The design for the church draws on building traditions of Cameroon in west-central Africa as well as Wenzler's own interest in the Neo-Expressionism style. The resulting design for Calvary both exemplifies a modernist architectural style and reflects the African cultural heritage of its Black congregation. Calvary Baptist Church is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under *Criterion C* in the area of *Architecture* at the local level of significance as an excellent example of the Neo-Expressionism style. The property's period of significance is 1971, the year of its construction. Calvary Baptist Church meets Criteria Consideration A since it derives its primary significance from architectural distinction.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Historic Context

The following historic context provides a brief history of Milwaukee and the Calvary Baptist congregation, a detailed property history, an overview of the Neo-Expressionism style and the related cultural context, and a brief biography of the church's architect, William Wenzler.

Milwaukee is the largest city in Wisconsin and is located on the southwest shore of Lake Michigan. The site of the present-day city is located on the traditional homelands of the Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee peoples.² White settlers began arriving in the area in the early nineteenth century, and in 1846 several early settlements merged to create the incorporated City of Milwaukee. In the nineteenth century, Milwaukee had three major cultural groups: Yankee settlers from New England; Irish immigrants escaping the Potato Famine; and German settlers, who were Milwaukee's largest ethnic group throughout much of its history. Other European immigrants joined these communities as well, and by 1890, 86% of all Milwaukeeans were foreign-born or first-generation children of immigrants.³

Each immigrant community brought its own religious traditions and often used the architecture of its house of worship to reflect the community's ethnic and cultural identity. Several of Milwaukee's most prominent examples of this phenomenon are St. Hyacinth Church (built in 1884 and located at 1414 W. Becher St.) and the Basilica of St. Josaphat (built in 1896; located at 601 W. Lincoln Ave.; and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 as NR#73000089), both of which drew on Central European Baroque traditions for their Polish Catholic congregations. Conversely, St. Paul's (built in 1882 at 904 E. Knapp St.; listed in the National Register in 1974 as NR#74000110) focused instead on a refined academic design from the city's preeminent architect for its affluent, cosmopolitan Episcopal congregation.

Historically, the population of Milwaukee was overwhelmingly white. In fact, by 1900, the city had a total population of 285,000 residents and fewer than 900 of these (roughly one-third of one percent) were Black. The African American community grew slightly during World War I, as war industries boomed and the government limited European immigration, and then expanded again in the 1920s as part of the broader story of the Great Migration that brought Black southerners to northern industrial cities. Neighborhood institutions were founded to support the African American community, including local chapters of the Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA); the Black-owned Columbia Building and Loan Association (founded by Calvary congregation members Ardie and Wilbur Halyard); the Black-owned *Wisconsin Enterprise Blade* newspaper; and numerous small businesses.⁴ Religion also played a part in building the community and ranged from storefront churches to the "old three" established Black congregations: St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church (founded in 1869), Calvary Baptist Church (the subject of this nomination, founded in 1895), and St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church (established in 1908).⁵

² Adapted from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee College of Letters and Sciences Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

³ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 3rd ed. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2008), 12-14, 24-25, 48-51, 60-61, 66-67, 71-73, 130, 183, 248-249.

⁴ The local UNIA chapter was led by Earl and Louise Little, parents of Malcolm X, when the family lived in Milwaukee between 1926 and 1929. Cited in "X, Malcolm," in *March on Milwaukee* (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries Digital Humanities Collections), accessed on September 9, 2025 from <https://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/x-malcolm/>.

⁵ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 3-33, 31.

A second wave of African American migration occurred after World War II, in what some scholars have termed Milwaukee's "late great migration."⁶ By 1970, the Black community made up roughly 15% of the city's total population. The postwar increase in Milwaukee's African American population exacerbated already-entrenched patterns of housing segregation. Historically, most of the city's Black population had lived in the "inner core," a small area north of the central business district. Discriminatory housing practices such as redlining, restrictive covenants and blockbusting both created and maintained racial segregation that limited housing opportunities for African Americans. Housing stock within the inner core was generally of lower quality than in other parts of the city; and because housing discrimination kept Blacks confined to such a small area, by the 1960s the population density of the inner core was double that of the city average. And while local, state, and federal fair housing laws eventually banned outright racial discrimination in housing, other more subtle, race-neutral policies emerged that allowed financial lenders and real estate agents to reinforce patterns of hyper-segregation that persist in Milwaukee to the present day.⁷ By the close of the twentieth century, racialized criminalization, employment bias, eventual unemployment, and poverty would also plague Milwaukee's Black community and dominate the city's public discourse.⁸ Through the decades, however, Milwaukee's Black community has sustained a rich history of resistance to patterns and practices associated with racial inequality, bolstered by support from community, civic, and religious institutions like Calvary Baptist Church.

Calvary Baptist Church congregation history

Calvary Baptist Church was organized in 1895 and is one of Milwaukee's three oldest African American religious congregations, along with St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church (founded in 1869) and St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church (established in 1908). Calvary Baptist was founded by Alexander W. Herron, Thomas L. Jackson, and Alfred Copeland. The congregation was initially named Mount Olive Baptist Church, and in its first years, held services in a rented building on St. Paul Avenue. In 1897, the congregation leased a plot of land near N. 7th Street and W. Wells Street and built a two-story brick building with a first-floor sanctuary and living quarters above.⁹ This building was the second purpose-built church erected by a Black congregation in Milwaukee and was located only four blocks away from the first purpose-built Black church, erected by the St. Mark AME congregation in 1887.¹⁰

With the construction of the new building, Mount Olive (as it was still named) also gained its first full-time pastor, Rev. J. D. Odom. The fledgling congregation struggled financially, however, and after losing the financial backing of some members, creditors foreclosed on the

⁶ Paul Geib, "From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of the Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970" *Journal of Negro History*, 83 (4) (1998): 229-48; and Paul Geib, "The Late Great Migration: A Case Study of Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1993).

⁷ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 49-53; Niles Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community: 1960-1980" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014), 12-17.

⁸ Robert L. Smith, "African Americans," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, accessed on June 19, 2025 from <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/african-americans/>.

⁹ The original address was 221 N. 7th St., placing it today at approximately 815 N. James Lovell St., midblock between W. Wells St. and W. Kilbourn Ave., on the site of the former IMAX theater at the Milwaukee Public Museum. Cited in "Three Quarters of a Century," *Milwaukee Star Times*, Feb. 12, 1973, section III, p. 13.

¹⁰ The St. Mark AME Church was located at the southeast corner of present-day N. Vel R. Phillips Ave. (formerly N. 4th St.) and W. Kilbourn Ave.

building. The owner of the land purchased the building and leased it back for \$25 a month to founding members Jackson and Herron, although Rev. Odom resigned and left Milwaukee.

The congregation went through several pastors over the next few years (including founding member Alexander Herron) and also moved in 1903 to a different rented space at the northeast corner of N. 6th Street and W. State Street.¹¹ In 1906, Rev. George J. Fox became the pastor and the church joined the Wisconsin Baptist Convention (after previously having been part of the North River Wood Association of Illinois). Several years later, in 1913, with the support of the state convention, the pastor and officers of the congregation purchased a building on W. Cherry Street.¹² The congregation also legally changed its name to Calvary Baptist Church, perhaps at the urging of Wisconsin Baptist Convention leaders over concerns with the former foreclosure and past court record associated with the name Mount Olive.¹³

Calvary remained on W. Cherry Street for nine years. Then, in 1922, the congregation purchased an existing church and parsonage located at 1727 N. 4th Street (now Vel R. Phillips Avenue). The church had been built in 1904 for a Lutheran congregation, who, by the early 1920s, was moving out of the so-called “inner core” of Milwaukee into a more affluent white neighborhood on the western edge of the city.¹⁴ Calvary Baptist Church would remain at 1727 N. 4th Street for nearly fifty years, until the construction of the subject building of this nomination.

Over the next decade, under the leadership of Rev. S. J. Williams and his wife Ella Williams, Calvary began a significant period of growth and development. The church increased its membership, decreased its debt, and installed a baptism pool. The church also began youth and adult clubs, leadership workshops, vacation Bible schools, and a city-wide usher board. One of the highest-profile events came in 1934, when the Calvary congregation organized and hosted the annual statewide convening of the Wisconsin Baptist Convention.¹⁵

This period of growth at Calvary Baptist Church can be directly traced to the Great Migration, when millions of African Americans left the rural south for urban northern cities. As mentioned previously, Milwaukee’s Black community grew significantly during this period, from 2,200 in 1920 to 7,500 in 1930.¹⁶ As the oldest and most established African American Baptist church in Milwaukee, Calvary played an important role in providing community networks for newcomers. The worship style at Calvary – identified by some scholars as a “shouting tradition” – also appealed to southern newcomers, where congregation members expressed themselves freely as

¹¹ “Three Quarters of a Century.”

¹² City directories list the address as 414 W. Cherry; “Three Quarters of a Century” gives the address as 418. Either address is roughly at the northeast corner of present-day N. 5th St. and W. Cherry St., on a site now occupied by an industrial building.

¹³ “Three Quarters of a Century;”

¹⁴ The 1904 Lutheran church at 1727 N. 4th St. was built for (perhaps confusingly) a congregation also named Mount Olive. After selling the building, Mt. Olive Lutheran moved to a grand Late Gothic Revival-style sanctuary at 5327 W. Washington Blvd., in the Washington Heights neighborhood. More information and photos of both Mt. Olive Lutheran churches are available in the Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory. See AHI 109103 for 1727 N. 4th St. (the 1904 church) and AHI 31968 for 5327 W. Washington Blvd. (the 1923 church).

¹⁵ “Three Quarters of a Century;” “Calvary Baptist Church” survey card,

¹⁶ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, 2nd ed., (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 31.

they were moved by the Holy Ghost, often shouting or weeping for joy.¹⁷ (In contrast, St. Mark AME Church, Milwaukee's other oldest Black Protestant congregation, "appealed to middle class respectability by conducting decorous, dignified services.")¹⁸

In 1937, Rev. Dr. Melvin J. Battle became pastor of Calvary Baptist Church and led the church for nearly three decades. Battle is credited with initiating outreach programs and increasing Calvary's membership from 264 to more than 1,400 during his tenure. He also organized a new Gospel Chorus, the first of its kind in Milwaukee. Battle was deeply involved in community affairs. He served on the board of the North Side YMCA and the Planned Parenthood Association, as well as securing a membership for Calvary in the local NAACP chapter.¹⁹ Battle was also an outspoken advocate during Milwaukee's early Civil Rights era. Battle stressed education, self-help, and the pursuit of step-by-step economic progress (as opposed to militancy) as the key to racial equality. Speaking to the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1956, Battle stressed that to achieve equality, "we have got to conduct ourselves so well that those who would humiliate us will feel cheap."²⁰

Battle retired in 1965 and was succeeded by Rev. Walter Hoard, who initiated the process of constructing the new church (the subject of this nomination). However, Hoard resigned from Calvary after only a few years when he accepted a job with the national American Baptist Convention, becoming its first Black associate secretary. Rev. Roy B. Nabors took over as pastor in 1970 and saw the completion of the new church. Nabors (who also served as a Milwaukee alderman during his tenure at Calvary) was deeply committed to Calvary's neighborhood and community, and spearheaded a major community outreach initiative to provide church-owned affordable, quality housing for the elderly. The Calvary Housing Development company, the first of its kind in Milwaukee, eventually expanded to include three housing projects. Calvary continues its community outreach, with a community food program, after school educational programs, summer day camps, and Operation Headstart programs in collaboration with the Milwaukee Public School district. Today, 130 years after its founding, Calvary remains a vibrant and active cornerstone of its community.

Construction History

Calvary had been located in its old sanctuary at 1727 N. Vel R. Phillips Avenue since 1922. By the early 1960s, the congregation had paid off its loans on the church and parsonage, burned the mortgages, and was ready to expand to larger facilities. The Calvary Baptist congregation purchased its new building site on Teutonia Avenue in June 1966 at a cost of \$70,000. The new site was roughly two miles north of the old church and comprised six adjacent lots which collectively contained six duplex residences, two retail buildings, and a rambling garage for a neighboring automobile repair shop.²¹ The site was platted in January 1967 and the existing buildings were cleared over the next two years.

¹⁷ Trotter, 128-129.

¹⁸ Trotter, 129, 31.

¹⁹ "Three Quarters of a Century."

²⁰ "Negroes Told to Be at Best," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 13, 1956, quoted in Kevin David Smith, "'In God We Trust': Religion, The Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999.

²¹ Keith Spruce, "Calvary Baptist Church," Milwaukee Houses of Worship: 1975 Survey, survey card on file in "Landmarks – Young, Mary Ellen Collection," Mss-2255, Milwaukee County Historical Society; Aerial

The congregation selected architect William Wenzler in July 1967. Wenzler's office worked with the congregation over the next year to develop plans for the new church. Wenzler later recounted the inspiration for the distinctive form of the building:

"I went over to the Milwaukee Public Library and met with Ed Green, a friend and head of the art department at the Milwaukee [Public] Museum. He selected a few books on African American architecture that I could read and review. This led me to the idea of using the African hut as a concept. [...] This also allowed me to have all the functions of the church integrated into one form."²²

Although never explicitly acknowledged by Wenzler or the Calvary congregation, Wenzler's African-influenced design was actually part of Milwaukee's long tradition of religious buildings that reflected the ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage of their congregations – albeit in a strikingly modern aesthetic at Calvary. Construction plans for the new Calvary Baptist Church were initially filed with the City of Milwaukee in August 1968; a revised set of plans were filed several months later in December 1968. The proposed building would contain 17,328 square feet of space spread over four floor levels.

At the same time as the City reviewed plans for the new building, the congregation was in the process of securing financing. After the congregation was turned down by three separate banks, Ardie Halyard, a trustee of Calvary Baptist Church, leveraged her connections to assemble a joint financing plan. Halyard was the co-founder (along with her husband Wilbur) of the Columbia Savings & Loan Association, the first Black-owned financial institution in Wisconsin. Halyard's own bank, the American Baptist Convention, and Milwaukee-based Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company each provided \$125,000 towards Calvary's new building.²³

A construction permit was issued in early September 1969, with Herbert Jaeger & Associates acting as general contractor and David Brandt (of Wenzler & Associates) acting as supervising engineer.²⁴ Excavation began in September 1969. By November, the foundation walls were up, and the first floor concrete slab was poured in mid-December. Work slowed for several months due to cold temperatures, but by March 1970, masons were at work on the brick exterior walls and the roof trusses had begun to go up. The cornerstone of the building was laid on Sunday, April 26, 1970, during a ceremony led by Clarence Parrish, chairman of the building

photographs, 1967 and 1970, Milwaukee County Land Information Office; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Milwaukee 1910-Dec. 1951, vol. 2, 1910-Nov. 1951, sheet 117.

²² Quoted in Deborah Wenzler Farris with William P. Wenzler, *Conversations with Dad: Stories of Love, Family, and Architecture*, (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2017), 140. Edward Green (1922-2017) graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a Master of Fine Art degree. Green worked for the Milwaukee Public Museum from 1951 until his retirement in 1984 and created many of the museum's exhibits, including its longtime Streets of Old Milwaukee exhibit.

²³ "\$20 Million Invested in Inner City," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 19, 1969, p. 4; Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981. Ardie Clark Halyard. OH-31, sequence 24. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Accessed on March 21, 2025 from <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:rad.schl:10043345>.

²⁴ Construction permit #239219, 2959 North Teutonia Ave., City of Milwaukee Department of Building Inspection and Safety Engineering, Sept. 3, 1969.

committee, and attended by Rev. Lovell Johnson, pastor of St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church, and members of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Masons.²⁵

The building's complex roof took several months to frame and sheathe and was finally completed in late June 1970. Interior finish work continued throughout the summer and fall. By December 1970, the interiors were nearly complete and contractors were in the process of installing sanctuary seating.²⁶

The congregation was anxious to enjoy their new building. On Thursday, December 16, 1970, the City building inspector sent notices to the architect and the pastor reminding them not to use the building until an occupancy permit had been filed and approved. That same day, David Brandt, the supervising engineer for the project, applied for an occupancy permit, including the special remark "We respectfully request that the respective inspections be made and expedited so that an occupancy permit can be issued in time for the Owner to worship in their new church on Sunday, 20 December 1970. Thank you!"²⁷ The City building inspector did not make his final inspection that weekend – or for nearly six weeks afterwards. Finally, on February 2, 1971, the church received its occupancy permit.²⁸

The new \$500,000 building was dedicated with a weeklong program beginning on Sunday, March 14, 1971. Calvary's former longtime pastor, Rev. M. J. Battle, preached the first service on Sunday evening. Additional services were held every night during the following week and were capped by a Saturday night program featuring students from North Division High School; Roundy Memorial Baptist Church in suburban Whitefish Bay; and Calvary Baptist's own congregation. A final dedication service was held on Sunday, March 21, 1971.²⁹

The *Milwaukee Journal* described the new church as a "free form structure, making generous use of exposed wood and concrete." Ardie Halyard, the financial mastermind behind the building's construction, spoke of the project as a "beautiful new church that we like to show off, and be proud of."³⁰ And perhaps most tellingly, other congregation members and church leaders celebrated the fact that their new purpose-built sanctuary was a contemporary expression of their own faith, instead of representing "the wornout feelings of some other group whose building was taken over by a Black congregation in the central city."³¹

William Wenzler & Associates, Architect

William P. Wenzler (1929-2016), the architect of Calvary Baptist Church, had a long career that married a keen interest in exploring innovative structural methods with deep Protestant religious faith. Wenzler was born in Milwaukee. He studied at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee before earning a Bachelor of Science in Architectural Engineering from the University of Illinois in 1952. Following his graduation, Wenzler returned to Milwaukee and worked in the offices of

²⁵ "Baptist Church Plans to Lay Cornerstone," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 25, 1970, p. 4.

²⁶ Construction permit #239219, op. cit.

²⁷ Occupancy permit application dated Dec. 16, 1970, included in file for 2959 N. Teutonia Ave., City of Milwaukee Department of Building Inspection and Safety Engineering.

²⁸ Construction permit #239219, op. cit.

²⁹ "Calvary Baptist Will Dedicate," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 13, 1971, part 1 p. 16.

³⁰ Ardie Clark Halyard interview, op. cit.

³¹ "Black Congregation Builds on Heritage," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 13, 1971, p. 4.

Alfred Siewert and Brust & Brust (both prolific designers of churches) before opening his own office in September 1955.³²

Initially located in the northshore suburb of Shorewood, Wenzler's office relocated to the western suburb of Brookfield in the early 1960s and then moved to downtown Milwaukee in 1970. Wenzler maintained professional memberships throughout his career in the American Institute of Architects, the American Concrete Institute, the International Association for Shell Structures, and the Church Architectural Guild of America.³³ Throughout his career, Wenzler designed a number of commercial, residential, educational, and religious buildings around the country. Notable Wisconsin commissions included buildings at Beloit College and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point; churches and houses in Sheboygan, Mukwonago, Elm Grove, West Allis, and Wauwatosa; and industrial and residential buildings in Milwaukee.³⁴

Wenzler's early work focused on thin-shelled concrete building technology. His first major project, completed in 1957, was St. Edmund Episcopal Church in Elm Grove, Wisconsin. St. Edmund's was one of the first hyperbolic paraboloid thin-shelled concrete structures constructed in the United States; an honor that won awards from the Church Architecture Guild of America and international recognition in the American and European architectural press.³⁵

Commissions for other thin shell concrete churches soon followed, but by the mid-1960s, Wenzler had begun to focus on the structural and expressive possibilities of glue-laminated timber beams. St. John's United Church of Christ in Random Lake, Wisconsin, built in 1965, combined a sweeping curved fieldstone wall with a low-pitched glue-lam timber roof.³⁶ A band of clerestory windows between the wall and the roof admitted light into the sanctuary; and the deeply projecting rafter tails were angled to create a spiky silhouette on the exterior. Wenzler's design for Calvary Baptist Church, completed a few years later, continued the design ideas of St. John's (solid walls, clerestory window band, low-pitched roof) but fused them with traditional African building forms as a symbolic display of Calvary's cultural heritage.

Wenzler would eventually design twenty-three churches throughout his career, all for Protestant congregations. Several of his later churches include elements introduced at Calvary, especially the light scoop over the altar, but Wenzler himself stated that his designs always began with the needs of the program, not preconceived forms or architectural elements.³⁷ Wenzler was deeply religious, and he and his wife Dolores were founding members of the non-denominational Eastbrook Church congregation in Milwaukee.³⁸ Wenzler credited his architectural design process to religious inspiration, stating that "...once I was hired and understood the goal, I spent

³² George Koyl, ed., *American Architects Directory*, second ed., (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1962), 749.

³³ *William P. Wenzler Architect and Associates Incorporated*, [Brookfield, WI: 1968], III: Personnel [n.p.]; "Wenzler Named AIA Fellow," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 25, 1971.

³⁴ Justin Miller, *Milwaukee Houses of Worship, 1920-1980: Architectural and Historical Intensive Survey Report* (Milwaukee: City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission, 2023), 127.

³⁵ George Koyl, ed., *American Architects Directory*, third ed., (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1970), 978; *William P. Wenzler Architect and Associates Incorporated*, V. Publicity [n.p.].

³⁶ Drawing Set No. 493-0170, "St. John's United Church of Christ, 98 Random Lake Rd., Random Lake, WI," Wisconsin Architectural Archive, Milwaukee Public Library.

³⁷ Farris, 111.

³⁸ "William Paul Wenzler" [obituary], *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 13, 2016.

a lot of time praying. Typically, the answer would just emerge. [...] When I relied on the Lord, I didn't have any trouble.”³⁹ Paradoxically for an architect, Wenzler also strongly believed that the activities of a religious congregation were more important than the space in which they gathered – a view that doubtless cost him several commissions.⁴⁰

Wenzler was also deeply committed to educational and Civil Rights issues. As a member of the Wisconsin chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Wenzler created the “Equal Opportunity in Architecture” program in 1968. The program matched minority high school students with paid summer internships in eight Milwaukee-area architectural firms, including Wenzler's own office. The program was successful and eventually grew to nearly fifty students.⁴¹

Architectural Context: African Influences and Neo-Expressionism

William Wenzler stated that part of his goal in designing Calvary Baptist Church was “to grasp the rich cultural background in Africa that preceded and undergirded the development of the contributions that Black Americans have made and are making to the American way of life.”⁴² Wenzler acknowledged that the design for Calvary was based on traditional buildings in Cameroon, located on the West African coast. These buildings typically have walls of clay brick or woven bamboo covered with a waterproof layer of clay. Exposed wood framing, consisting of long, thin poles, supports the hipped or conical roofs. The roofs are covered in thatch and have deep overhangs. Each building typically contains a single interior room, and groups of buildings can be clustered together to form compounds.⁴³

Wenzler adapted the forms of these African buildings to postwar American building materials and construction methods. In Wenzler's design for Calvary, the small buildings became large single-room spaces. Clay walls became brick masonry, and bamboo pole thatched roofs were transformed into expressive glue-laminated beams and exposed board ceilings. And the two “huts,” as the congregation affectionately calls them, huddle together and form a sculptural and dynamic building mass.

William Wenzler's design for Calvary Baptist Church, with its intentional interpretation of traditional Cameroonian architecture, reflects a broader cultural movement that emphasized and celebrated African aesthetics and cultural heritage. The Black Arts Movement, as it came to be known, lasted for about a decade between 1965 and 1975. Described by author and scholar Larry Neal as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister” of the Black Power movement, the Black Art Movement shared similar ideologies of Black self-determination and political values.⁴⁴ Leaders of the Black Arts Movement advocated for a “Black aesthetic” – artistic expressions rooted in African cultural heritage and contemporary Black experience.⁴⁵

³⁹ Quoted in Farris, 107, 139.

⁴⁰ Farris, 112-113.

⁴¹ “Equal Opportunity in Architecture,” *Wisconsin Architect*, vol. 40, no. 1, January 1969, 10-13.

⁴² “Black Congregation Builds on Heritage,” *op. cit.*

⁴³ Andy Hope, “Calvary Baptist, 1970,” in *Architecture of Faith*, accessed on June 17, 2025 from <http://architectureoffaithmilwaukee.info/V-Modernism/71-Calvary-Baptist.aspx>. See also Wolfgang Lauber, *Palaces and Compounds in the Grasslands of Cameroon* (Stuttgart, Germany: Karl Krämer Verlag, 1990).

⁴⁴ Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Drama Review* 12, vol. 12, no. 4, Black Theatre (Summer 1968), p. 29.

⁴⁵ *Art In Context: The Black Arts Movement*, National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.

This cultural movement encompassed a wide range of literature, drama, music, and the visual arts. Literary critics like Addison Gayle, Jr. called for artists to create works that reflected their African heritage.⁴⁶ The “Black is Beautiful” movement celebrated Black beauty aesthetics like the Afro hairstyle. In popular culture, realistic depictions of African American life entered mainstream media through programs like the sitcom “Julia” or the musical program “Soul Train.”⁴⁷ Even local Milwaukee companies were part of the larger cultural movement, where retailers like the African House No. 1 clothing store emphasized their African heritage, as illustrated in a full-page advertisement in *The Greater Milwaukee Star* in September 1969 (ten days after the building permit for Calvary was issued) which reads: “Back to School – Black and Proud. Be With the African ‘Jet Set’ on the First Day of School, Wear an Authentic African Garment.”⁴⁸

The interest in African cultural heritage extended to the built environment as well, where architectural scholars like bell hooks and John Michael Vlach began to study and analyze the legacy of African building traditions. Their foundational work on this subject, however, focused on the relationship between traditional African building practices and the development of vernacular American building forms (Vlach) or theoretical explorations of space, experience, and meaning (hooks).⁴⁹ Few, if any, scholarly works have examined the direct influence of African architecture on American designers during the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s – which both offers a rich subject for future research, and reinforces the fact that Calvary Baptist Church is a unique product of a specific period in time.

Wenzler’s design for Calvary Baptist Church not only reflects a period of growing interest in African heritage and culture. It is also an outstanding example of the Neo-Expressionism style of architecture. Neo-Expressionism was popular in Wisconsin between the 1950s and 1970s. The style emphasizes form, abstraction, and emotion over rationalism and geometric regularity. Buildings in the style are often asymmetrical and organic, and modern materials and engineering techniques are used for dramatic effect. Neo-Expressionism avoids rectangles whenever possible, preferring instead sharp angles, sweeping curves, pointed roofs, and convex, concave, or faceted surfaces.⁵⁰ In Wisconsin, the Neo-Expressionism style is almost always found on religious buildings, although public structures, often for recreational use, also sometimes occur.

Calvary embodies many of the character-defining features typically associated with Neo-Expressionism, with its irregular plan, sculptural forms, and sweeping roofs. The faceted polygonal building masses of the sanctuary and fellowship hall contrast against the concave walls of the narthex; and inside, the asymmetrical interior spaces and dramatic exposed glue-

⁴⁶ See, for example Addison Gayle, Jr., ed. *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971).

⁴⁷ “Black is Beautiful: The Emergence of Black Cultural and Identity in the 60s and 70s,” [visual essay], Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History & Culture, accessed on June 17, 2025 from <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-beautiful-emergence-black-culture-and-identity-60s-and-70s>.

⁴⁸ *Greater Milwaukee Star*, Sept. 13, 1969, p. 15.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Vlach’s essays on shotgun houses in *Natural History*, LXXXVI, 1977, or in Vlach’s *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* produced for the same exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1978; or hooks’ essays in *Art on My Mind: visual politics*, 1995.

⁵⁰ Bridgeman, Michael, “Neo-Expressionism,” [illustrated essay], Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office, 2025.

laminated beams make Calvary Baptist Church an outstanding example of the Neo-Expressionism style.

The architectural historian Marcus Whiffen has also observed that Neo-Expressionism also represents a process of designing, in addition to the final form of the building. Whiffen notes that “the architect’s first concern, at least in theory, is to express the essence of the program as he conceives of it.”⁵¹ William Wenzler’s approach to designing Calvary illustrates this point perfectly. Wenzler identified the specific spatial requirements for the building (i.e. a sanctuary, a fellowship space, and educational and administrative areas) and expressed each of those elements as part of the sculptural exterior. In drawing on traditional African building techniques, Wenzler avoided traditional Northern European Christian religious symbolism and instead imbued the church with symbol and meaning that is conveyed through its form – another character-defining feature of Neo-Expressionism.⁵²

Calvary Baptist Church, then, can be appreciated on two levels. Judged in the abstract, it is one of Milwaukee’s most unique examples of the Neo-Expressionism style. Understood within its context, it is also a modern example of the long tradition in religious architecture of using architectural forms to express the cultural heritage of its congregation.

As described by Marcus Whiffen, buildings in the Neo-Expressionism style “should be the unique products of the marriage of the program – the architectural counterpart of the painter’s subject – and the individual sensibility of the architect.”⁵³ William Wenzler’s sensitive understanding of the spatial and structural requirements of the building, as well as his earnest desire to celebrate the cultural heritage of its African American congregation, make Calvary Baptist Church a locally significant work of architecture and worthy of inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Comparative Analysis

Calvary Baptist Church is being nominated to the National Register at the local level of significance. The geographic area for this comparative analysis consists of the City of Milwaukee. The City of Milwaukee sponsored a thematic survey of all twentieth-century purpose-built houses of worship within the municipal boundaries in 2023.⁵⁴ All properties surveyed as part of the thematic survey are included in the Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory (AHI), a publicly accessible online database managed by the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office. Calvary Baptist Church was identified as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places during the thematic survey.

There are five other Neo-Expressionist-style buildings in the City of Milwaukee in addition to Calvary: one public building and four churches. Calvary compares favorably with, or better than, the other five examples.

⁵¹ Whiffen, 274.

⁵² Whiffen, 274.

⁵³ Whiffen, 273-274.

⁵⁴ See for reference Justin Miller, *Milwaukee Houses of Worship, 1920-1980: Architectural and Historical Intensive Survey Report* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission, 2023).

The Milwaukee County War Memorial (750 N. Lincoln Memorial Dr., AHI 40648) was designed by internationally renowned architect Eero Saarinen and completed in 1955. With its prominent downtown lakefront site, its sculptural concrete forms, and the architectural pedigree of its designer, the War Memorial is the best-known example of Neo-Expressionism in Milwaukee. The War Memorial is in good condition and retains integrity and has not been evaluated for listing in the National Register. Calvary Baptist Church compares favorably to the War Memorial, with similar good condition and similar integrity. However, with the exception of its wedge-shaped concrete piers, the War Memorial is essentially a rectilinear building. In contrast, Calvary is a better representative example of the sweeping curves and organic forms more typically associated with the Neo-Expressionism style.

Zion United Church of Christ (3301 S. 76th St., AHI 118351) was built in 1958 and designed by William Wenzler, roughly a decade before he designed Calvary Baptist Church. Zion is one of Wenzler's early thin shell concrete churches and consists of curved panels known as hyperbolic paraboloids. Zion is in fair condition due to the installation of plexiglass panels over its windows, as well as bubbling within its outer roof membrane. Zion also has had several additions to its educational wing. For these reasons, Zion was not recommended as eligible for listing in the National Register as part of the 2023 thematic survey of Milwaukee's houses of worship. Calvary Baptist Church retains better condition and equal integrity to Zion. In addition, Calvary has not had any additions to its original sculptural form, making it a better representative example of Neo-Expressionism.

Emmanuel Lutheran Church for the Deaf (4328 W. North Ave., AHI 119967) was designed by Harry Ollrogge and built in 1963. The church was recommended as potentially eligible for National Register listing in the 2023 thematic survey under *Criterion A* in the areas of *Social History* and *Religion* for its association with Lutheran outreach to the deaf community. However, Emmanuel was not recommended as eligible for its architectural design in the 2023 survey. Emmanuel Lutheran Church is in good condition but alterations to its interior have affected the integrity of its original plan and interior finishes. While Emmanuel retains its striking rubble stone walls and dramatic roof prow, it lacks the dramatic interior spaces or organic forms that are generally associated with Neo-Expressionism, making Calvary a better example in comparison.

Benediction Lutheran Congregational Church (5740 N. 86th St., AHI 115445) was also built in 1963 and was designed by Donald Grieb. With its unique tent-like volume, its distinctive copper cladding, and its intact historic period interior, Benediction was recommended as potentially eligible for the National Register under *Criterion C* as part of the 2023 thematic survey. Benediction is in excellent condition and retains integrity in all seven aspects. Calvary compares favorably to Benediction Lutheran in terms of condition and integrity. Additionally, both Benediction and Calvary are still owned by their original congregations, unlike the other two churches previously discussed, which are now occupied by different religious denominations, resulting in changes to the interior spaces and functions. Although both Calvary Baptist and Benediction Lutheran are good examples of the Neo-Expressionism style, the choice of Neo-Expressionism at Calvary holds special significance. The design for Benediction Lutheran was influenced by Eero Saarinen's North Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana (NRHP #00000705), widely published during its construction and recognized as a significant work of modern architecture. Saarinen's church and Benediction Lutheran in Milwaukee were both

designed by white architects for white congregations. In contrast to Benediction, however, the use of Neo-Expressionism at Calvary Baptist Church serves a distinct purpose in order to call out its congregation's African heritage.

Christ the King Baptist Church (7750 N. 60th St., AHI 245492) was designed by Helmut Ajango and built in 1996. Christ the King was identified during the 2023 thematic survey but was not evaluated for the National Register since it is not yet fifty years of age. The design of Christ the King, with its shallow, spreading roof that rises into a spire, was also influenced by Eero Saarinen's design for North Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana. Calvary is equal in terms of condition and integrity to Christ the King. However, in comparison to Christ the King's square roof and rectilinear education wing, Calvary better illustrates the dynamic curves and organic forms typically associated with Neo-Expressionism.

Calvary Baptist Church is also architecturally significant for its imaginative adaptation of traditional African building forms to reflect the heritage of its congregation. There are no known comparable buildings in Milwaukee that use African building forms or traditions in such a prominent and intrinsic way, making Calvary a unique and distinctive example.

Concluding Significance Statement

Calvary Baptist Church was constructed in 1971 for Milwaukee's oldest African American Baptist religious congregation. The church was designed and built during a time of growing interest in African history and culture among Black Americans. Architect William Wenzler's design for the church drew on traditional building forms from Cameroon and combined them with the organic, sculptural forms of the Neo-Expressionism style. The resulting church is both an outstanding local example of Neo-Expressionism as well as a striking embodiment of the African cultural heritage of its Black congregation. Because of its architectural significance, Calvary Baptist Church is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under *Criterion C: Architecture*.

Land Acknowledgement (will be reviewed by the Office of the State Archaeologist)

This nomination recognizes the depth of human presence here, the ancestral homeland of American Indians for millennia. From as early as the seventeenth century, Euro-American exploration and settlement, military campaigns, and government programs, all had the effect of repeated displacement of Indians of many tribal affiliations. This continuous tribal movement resulted in Wisconsin being home to many tribes who originated from other parts of the country, generating a pattern of immigration, relocation, and formation of a new homeland. Some of these tribes remain in Wisconsin but others may not. We acknowledge that the property that is the subject of this nomination is located on land long occupied by American Indians.

Archaeological Potential (will be drafted and reviewed by the Office of the State Archaeologist)

Preservation Activities

Calvary Baptist Church was evaluated as potentially eligible for the NRHP during a thematic survey of Milwaukee's houses of worship conducted in 2023. Eligibility was re-affirmed prior to the writing of this nomination. As a partner with the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the National Park Service (NPS) participating in the Certified Local Government (CLG) program, the City of Milwaukee is required to maintain a system to survey and inventory historic properties. That entails regular surveys with updates every 20-25 years to identify properties that appear potentially eligible for the NRHP.

Acknowledgments

This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, or disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20240.

The activity that is the subject of this Nomination has been financed entirely with Federal Funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, and administered by the Wisconsin Historical Society. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior or the Wisconsin Historical Society. Nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior or the Wisconsin Historical Society.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☒ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory #: 56548

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END OF BIBLIOGRAPHY DO NOT DELETE

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 0.75 acre

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☒ NAD 1983

1. Zone:	<u>16N</u>	Easting:	<u>424483</u>	Northing:	<u>4769394</u>
2. Zone::	<u></u>	Easting:	<u></u>	Northing:	<u></u>
3. Zone::	<u></u>	Easting:	<u></u>	Northing:	<u></u>
4. Zone:	<u></u>	Easting:	<u></u>	Northing:	<u></u>

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary for Calvary Baptist Church consists of a roughly trapezoidal polygon. The boundary can be described in a clockwise fashion as follows: Beginning at the southeast corner of the existing legal parcel, the boundary runs west along a portion of the southern parcel line for approximately 200 feet. The boundary then turns north and runs for 255 feet along a straight line formed by extension of the western parcel line along the existing west edge of driveway. The boundary then turns and runs east for 30 feet along the northernmost parcel line. The boundary then turns and follows the parcel line south for 44 feet, then turns again and continues east along the parcel line for 115 feet. The boundary then turns and follows the eastern parcel line southeast for approximately 221 feet to return to the point of origin at the southeast corner.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary was delineated to include the contributing building and its associated driveway and to exclude the adjacent parking lot and extraneous lawn that is owned by the church but not historically associated with the subject building. The northern, eastern, and a portion of the southern boundaries coincide with existing legal parcel lines. The western boundary was delineated to coincide with the northern portion of the west legal parcel line and its logical extension. The area within the boundary comprises a portion of a single larger legal parcel owned by the Calvary Baptist Church congregation.

END OF GEOGRAPHIC DATA DO NOT DELETE

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Justin Miller, Architectural Historian
organization: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Cultural Resource Management
street & number: PO Box 413
city or town: Milwaukee State: WI zip code: 53201
Email: jcmill@uwm.edu
Telephone: 414-251-9495

Additional Documentation**Figure Log**

Figure 1. USGS map of Calvary Baptist Church

Figure 2. Sketch map of nominated area

Figure 3. William Wenzler undated design sketch for Calvary Baptist Church

Figure 4. Photo key and plan of main level sanctuary, narthex, and fellowship hall

Figure 5. Photo key and plan of lower-level classrooms and chapel

Figure 6. Cross-section of building levels

Figure 7. Furniture arrangement plan, main level sanctuary

Figure 1. USGS map of Calvary Baptist Church

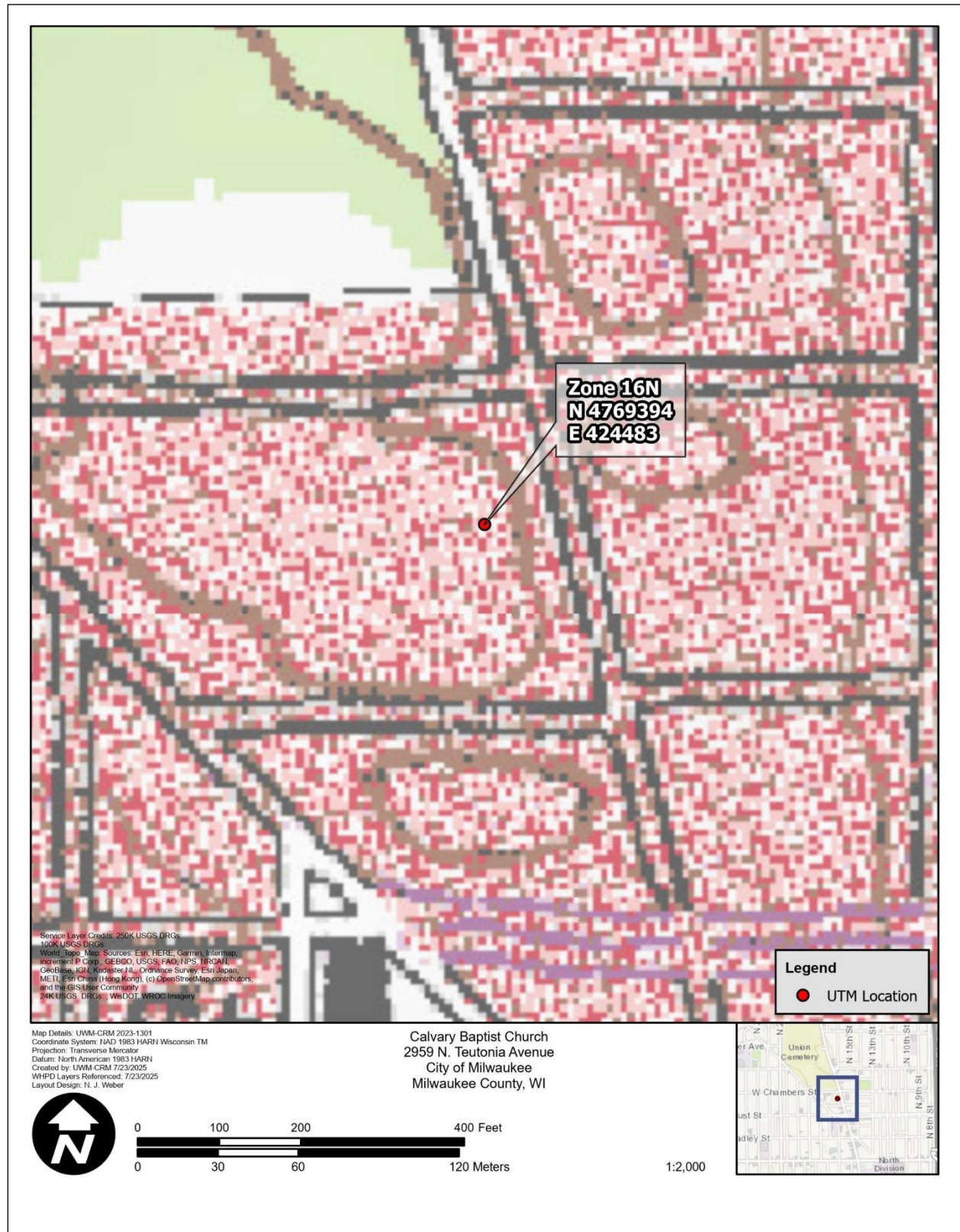


Figure 2. Sketch map of nominated area, June 2025.

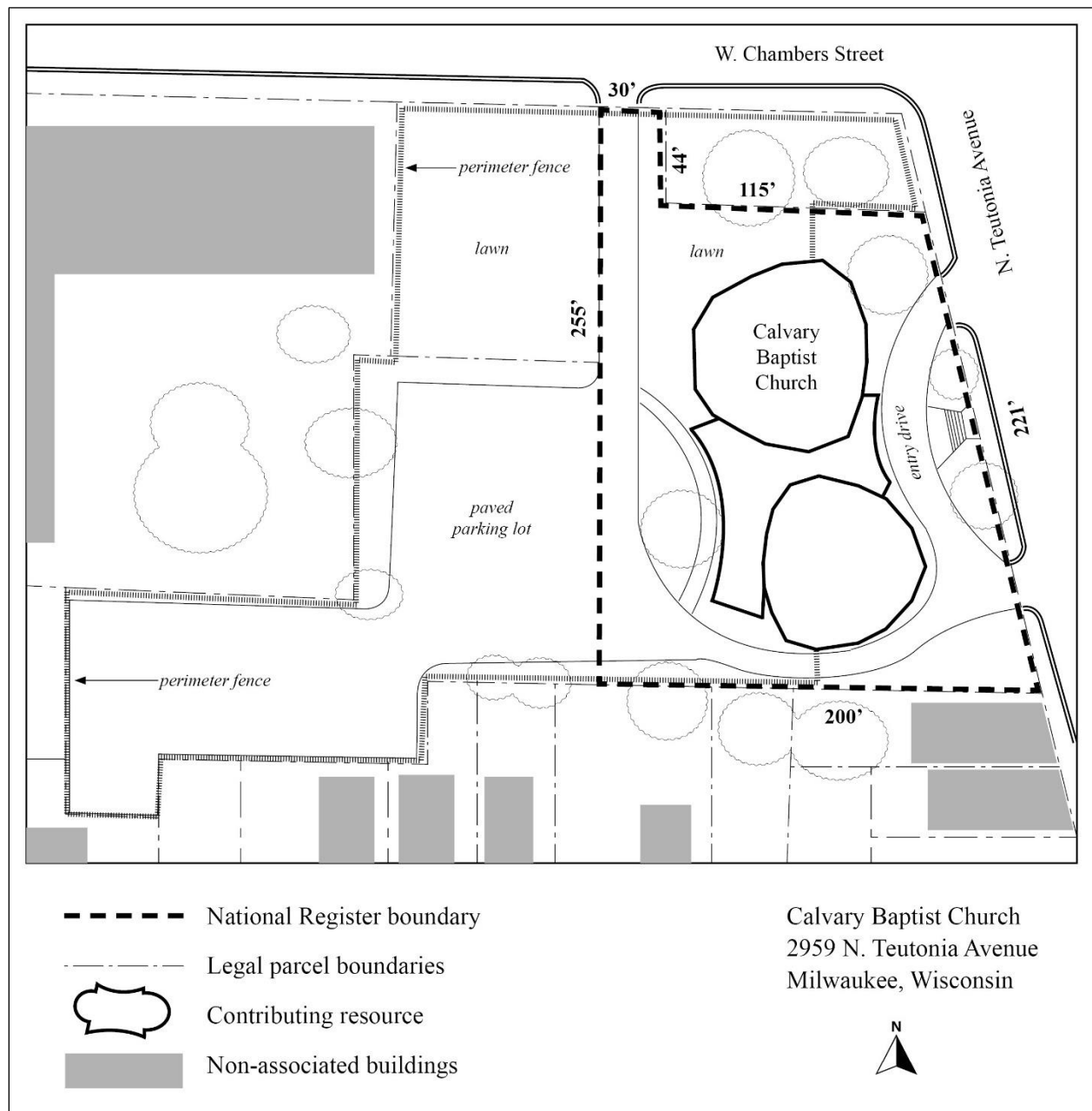


Figure 3: William Wenzler undated design sketch for Calvary Baptist Church (from Wenzler Farris, Deborah, with William P. Wenzler. *Conversations with Dad: Stories of Love, Family, and Architecture*. Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2017.)

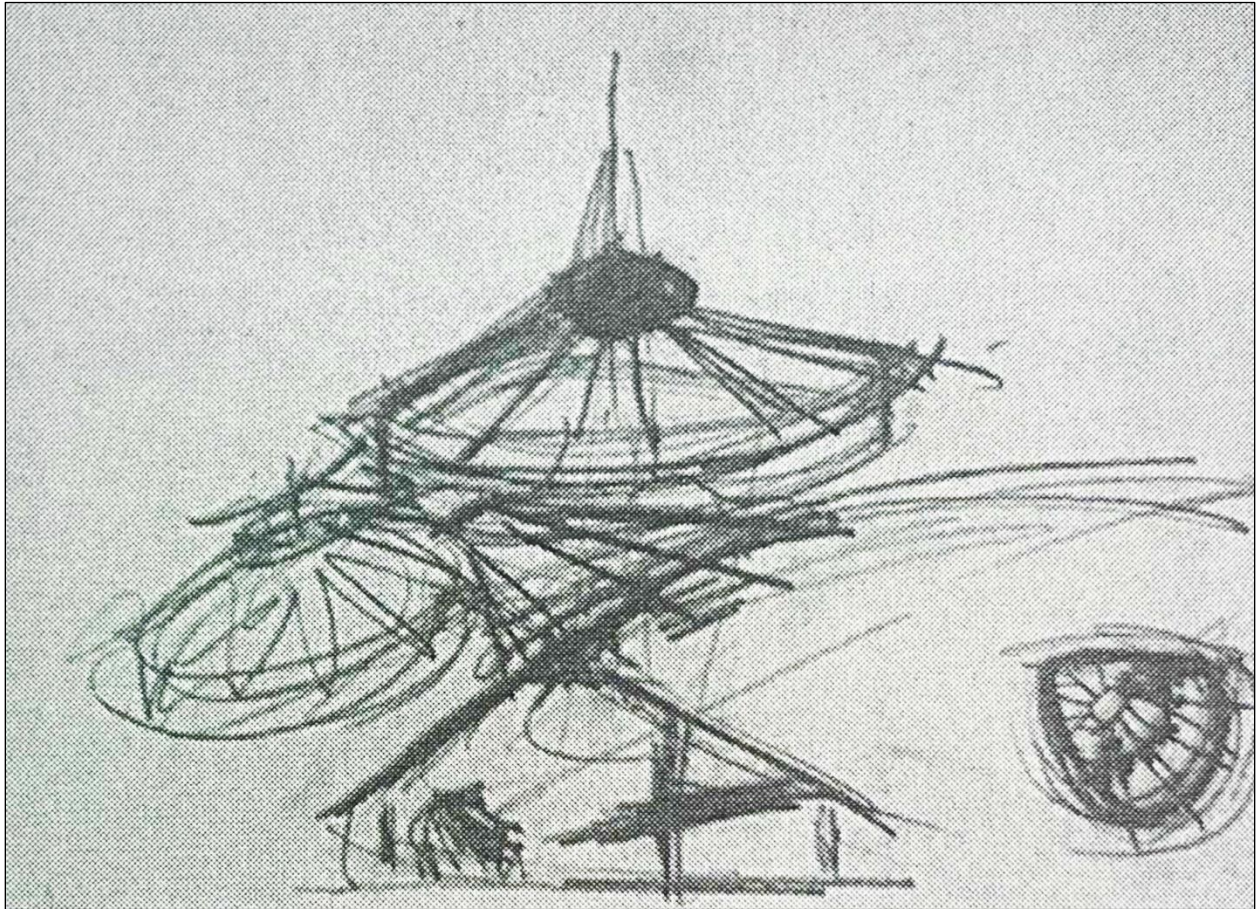


Figure 4. Photo key and plan of main level sanctuary, narthex, and fellowship hall. Plans courtesy of City of Milwaukee City Records Center and Calvary Baptist Church.

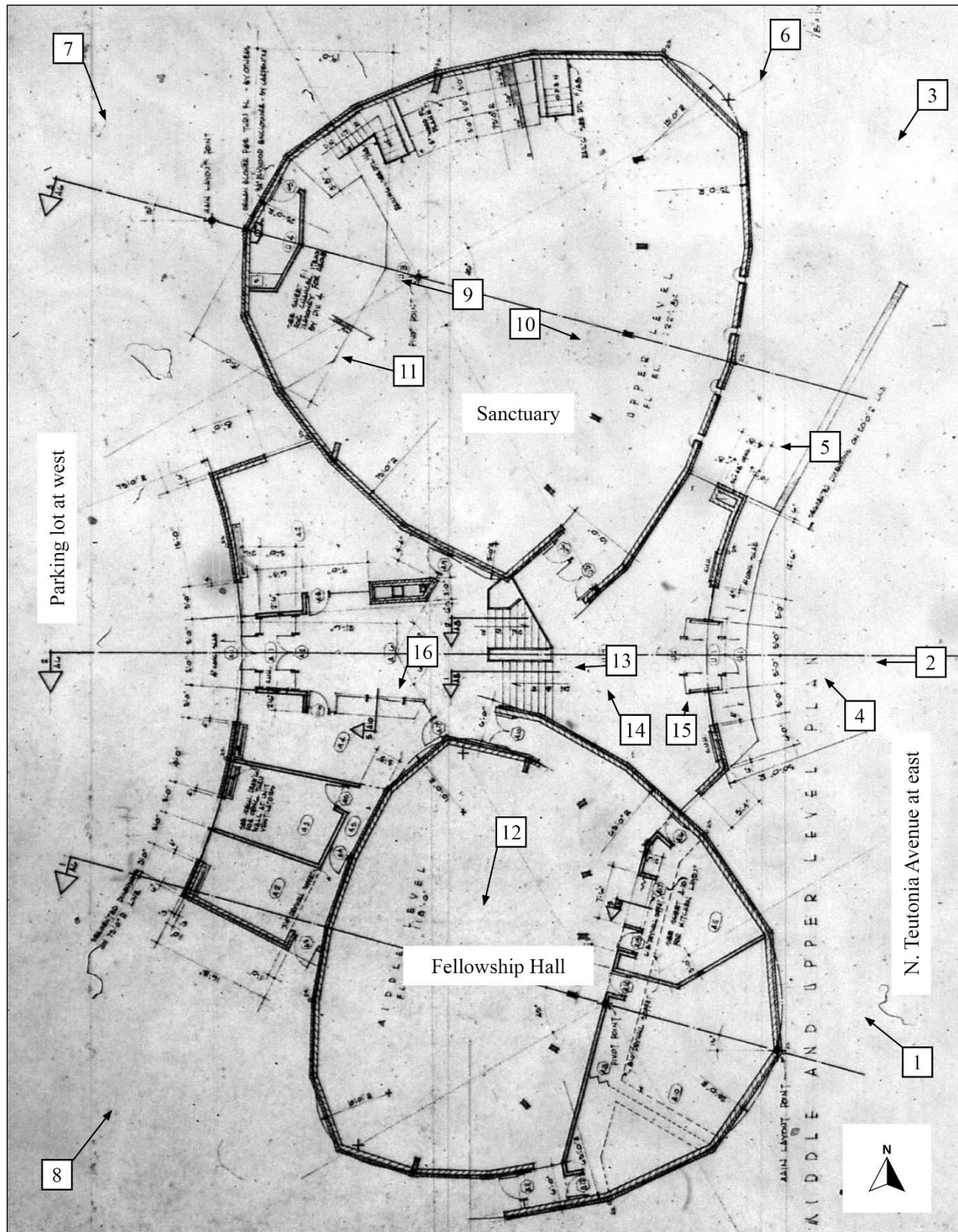


Figure 5. Photo key and plan of lower-level classrooms. Plans courtesy of City of Milwaukee City Records Center and Calvary Baptist Church.

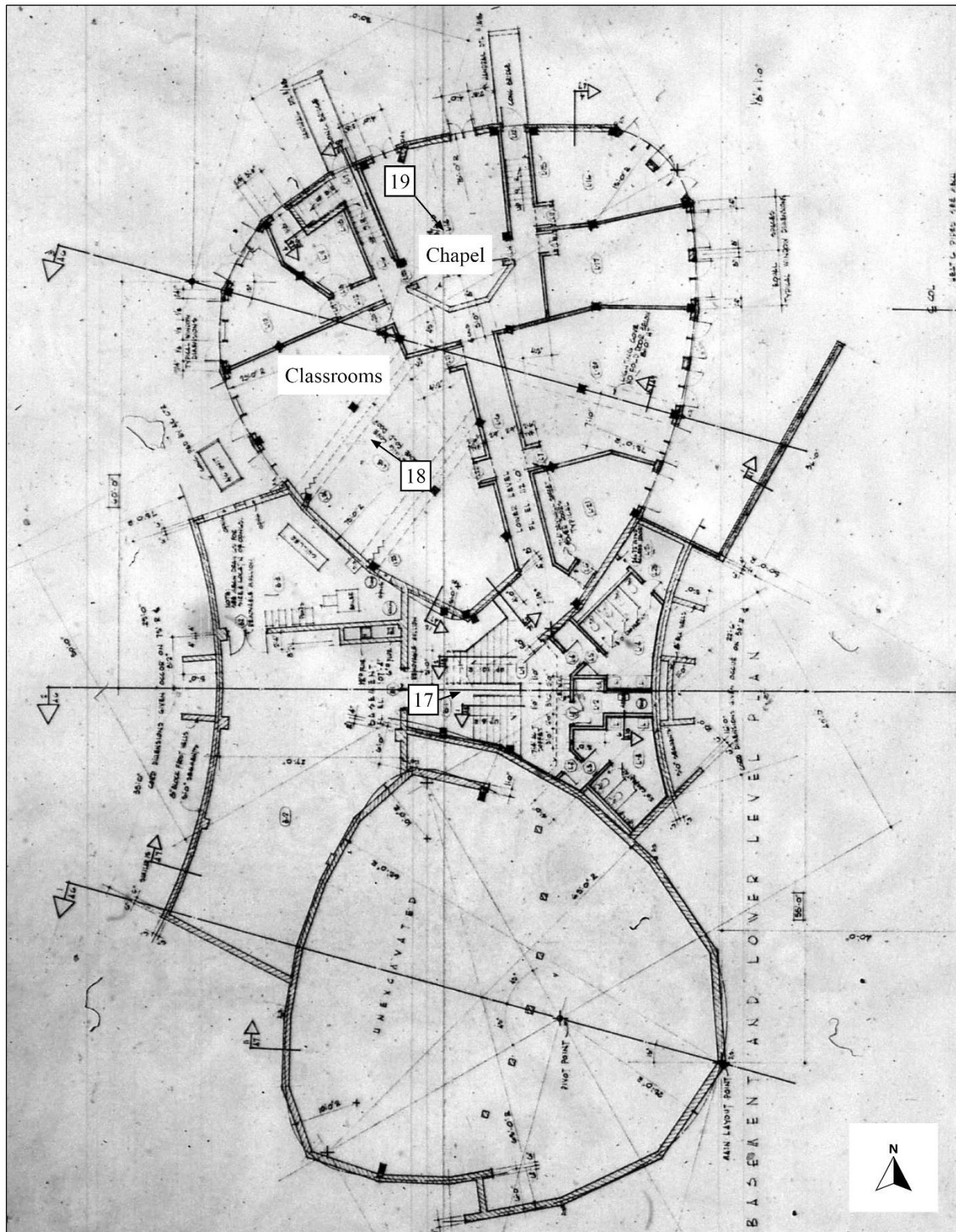


Figure 6. Cross-section of building levels. Plans courtesy of City of Milwaukee City Records Center and Calvary Baptist Church.

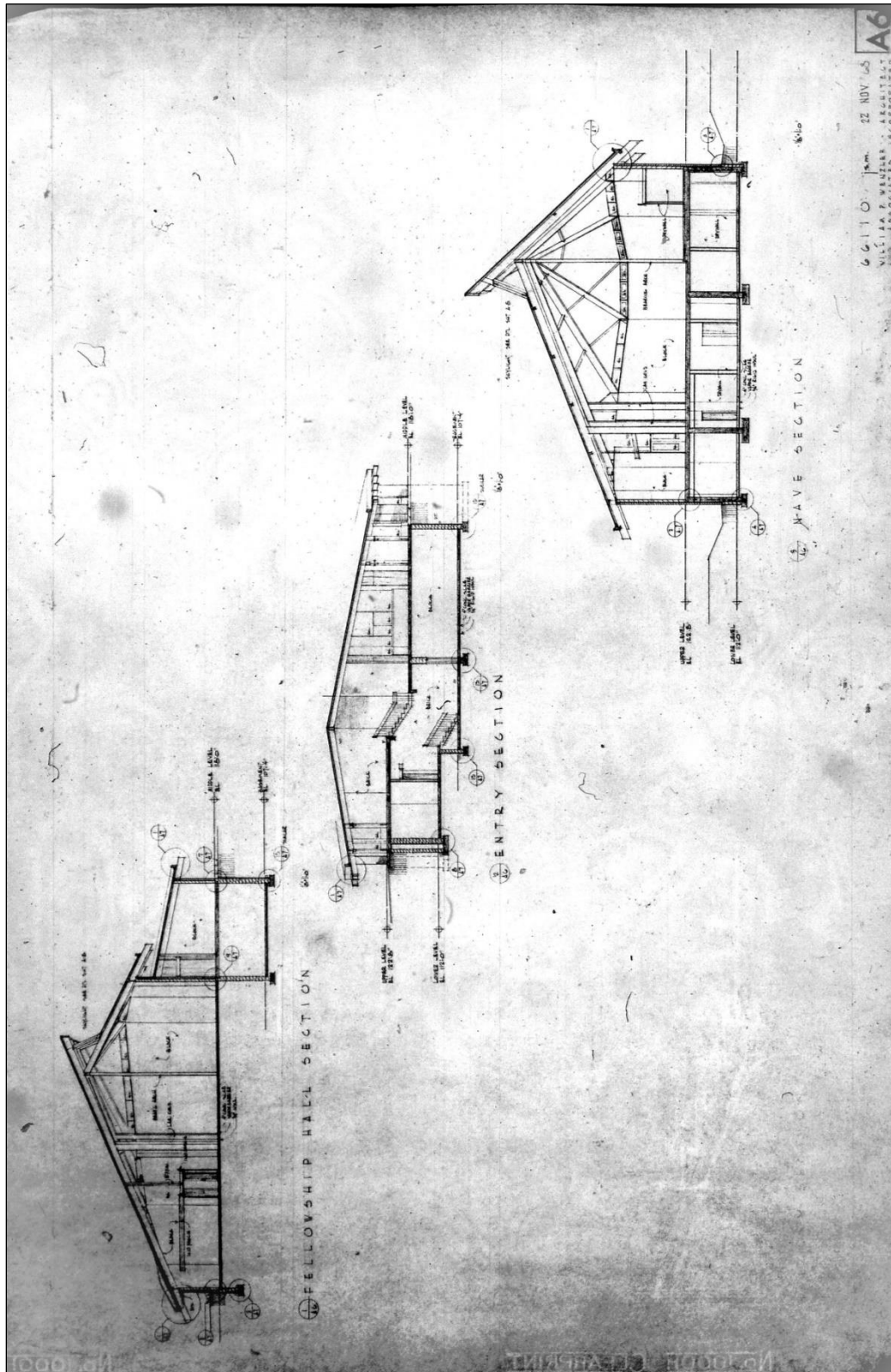
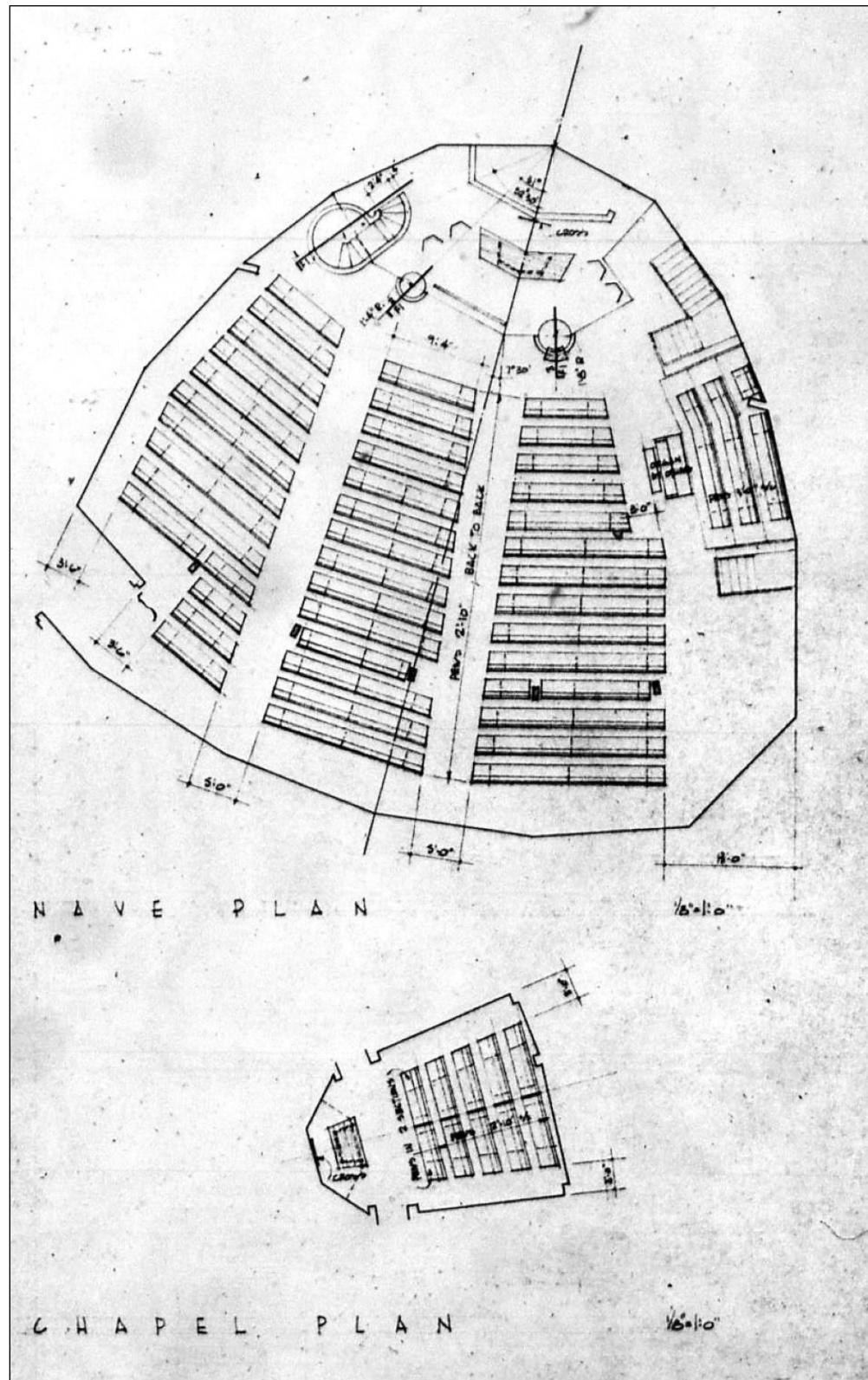


Figure 7. Furniture arrangement plan, main level sanctuary. Plans courtesy of City of Milwaukee City Records Center and Calvary Baptist Church.



END OF FIGURES SECTION DO NOT DELETE

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once in the photograph log. The photograph order must correspond with the photograph log.

Photo Log

Name of Property:	Calvary Baptist Church		
City or Vicinity:	Milwaukee		
County:	Milwaukee	State:	WI
Photographer:	Justin Miller University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Cultural Resource Management		
Date photographed:	March 12, 2025 (photos 1-6 and 9-19); September 18, 2025 (photos 7 and 8)		

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 19: East (primary) elevation, looking northwest; fellowship hall at left.
- 2 of 19: East (primary) elevation, looking west.
- 3 of 19: East (primary) elevation, looking south; sanctuary at right.
- 4 of 19: East elevation, detail of exterior stairs, looking northwest.
- 5 of 19: East elevation, detail of ramp and sanctuary windows, looking west.
- 6 of 19: North elevation, looking south.
- 7 of 19: West (parking lot) elevation, looking southeast; sanctuary at left.
- 8 of 19: West (parking lot) elevation, looking northeast
- 9 of 19: Sanctuary interior, looking northwest towards chancel.
- 10 of 19: Sanctuary interior, looking southeast.
- 11 of 19: Sanctuary interior, detail of baptismal pool and lectern, looking west.
- 12 of 19: Fellowship hall interior, looking southeast.
- 13 of 19: Narthex interior, looking west.
- 14 of 19: Narthex interior, looking northwest.
- 15 of 19: Narthex interior, detail of east vestibule, looking north.
- 16 of 19: Narthex interior, detail of reception area, looking southwest.
- 17 of 19: Narthex interior, detail of stairs, looking southwest.
- 18 of 19: Classroom interior, looking northwest.
- 19 of 19: Chapel interior, looking southeast.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

Property Owner

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title	Rev. Dr. John and Lorrie Walton, Pastor and First Lady		
organization	Calvary Baptist Church	date	June 1, 2025
street & number	2959 N. Teutonia Ave.	phone	414-732-1450
city or town	Milwaukee	state	WI
		zip code	53206

If there are other interested parties that should be noticed, please provide in the tables below

name/title	Tim Askin		
organization	Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission	date	June 1, 2025
street & number	841 N. Broadway, Room B-1	phone	414-286-5712
city or town	Milwaukee	state	WI
		zip code	53202

name/title			
organization		date	
street & number		phone	
city or town		state	WI
		zip code	

name/title			
organization		date	
street & number		phone	
city or town		state	WI
		zip code	