

Churches

A number of churches dotted the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo landscape.

Lily of the Valley Baptist Church, located at 121 Weller Street and headed by Rev. H. Dillard, was one of the first churches to open in the area in 1943. Mrs. O.L. Dillard was known to drive around East First, Second and San Pedro streets, picking up Bronzeville children and bringing them to Sunday school. In October 1944, the Rev. H.K. "Sin Killing" Griffin opened an eight night revival at Lily of the Valley.

The Providence Missionary Baptist Association launched the most ambitious evangelical undertaking by converting the Los Angeles Homba Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, also referred to as Nishi Hongwanji, into a Christian center. The temple building housed the headquarters of the Providence Baptist Institute, a theology school, and the First Street Baptist Church, both of which were overseen by the Providence Baptist Association.

The institute and church, headed by the Rev. Dr. L.B. Brown, opened its doors on Sunday, Jan. 30, 1944, by offering three sermons, the first at 11 a.m., a "Mammoth Mass" at 3 p.m., and a final one at 8 p.m.

Earlier in 1943, the Los Angeles City Playground and Recreation Commission had unsuccessfully tried to turn the building into a municipal recreation center for Bronzeville children.

The temple building, on the corner of Central Avenue and First Street (117-119 North Central Avenue and 355-369 East First Street), is currently occupied by the Japanese American National Museum. During World War II, a large majority of the temple space, like other Little Tokyo churches and temples, was packed with the suitcases and furniture of evicted Japanese Americans.

The institute occupied six rooms on the third floor of the temple building, and offered a four-year course, leading to a bachelor of theology degree and graduate courses.

Some of these classes included church history I and II; homiletics; hermeneutics; Old and New Testaments; literature; systemic theology; archaeology; public speaking; psychology; Greek I & II; Hebrew; English; and rhetoric.

In addition, the institute worked jointly with the Los Angeles City Board of Education to offer secular adult classes such as typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, music, art and handcraft work.

The temple's first floor housed the First Street Baptist Church, where Sunday services were held.

The first floor also housed Dr. George Hill Hodel's First Street Clinic, a medical center where he treated everything from venereal diseases to influenza.

The Providence Missionary Baptist Association's evangelical project was short-lived. As the United States government began releasing Japanese Americans from the confinement camps, the Rev. Julius Goldwater, on behalf of the Homba Hongwanji Buddhist Temple board, notified the Baptist Association that their lease could not be renewed after it expired on Jan. 5, 1945, since the Japanese Americans were returning. Goldwater, one of the first non-Japanese Buddhist minister on the mainland and cousin to presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, was given war-time power of attorney over the temple, since he did not have to enter a confinement camp.

The Baptist Association board voted to vacate the premise but became embroiled in a lawsuit with the temple, when one of their members, on behalf of the Baptist Association, sued the temple. In September 1950, the case was dismissed.