

Adult Theater, Frat House Became Ministry Havens in Michigan, Florida

A growing church and a student group convert dens of sin

A church in Michigan and a student ministry in Florida have taken over buildings where godlessness once reigned and turned them into centers for spreading the gospel.

Members of Revival Tabernacle Assembly of God in Detroit took over a triple-X adult theater in 1990 and have grown into a 300-person congregation in one of the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in the United States.

"We wanted to buy a building on the main street, and there was this theater that had been showing triple-X movies for 25 years," said pastor Tim Dilena, 37. There were 11 people in his congregation at the time.

"We felt like this was the Lord, and I met with the owner without a dime in my pocket. In just two weeks God provided all the money."

The owner handed them the keys—and left everything inside, including projectors, magazines and movie reels. Dilena and crew gutted the theater, filled a Dumpster and started holding services.

"For the first couple of years we had guys come by asking when the movie was, and we'd tell them Sunday at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.," Dilena said.

The church has grown by reaching people in its local community. A man who works in the church's soup kitchen used to frequent the triple-X theater until he was converted. The saxophone player in the worship band used to deal drugs. One member lived in an abandoned house before going through a Teen Challenge program.

"We're still triple X-ex-junkies, ex-prostitutes, ex-alcoholics—who gave their lives to the Lord," Dilena said. "Not a week goes by without people being saved."

Within a block of the church are two other X-rated theaters and a hotel for prostitution, but the people of Revival Tabernacle have bought the rest of the buildings on their block and are using them for youth and child ministries.

And they have planted eight churches across the country, including one that now meets in a former Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall.

"It's a pretty wild place, and we live right in the middle of it," said Dilena, whose home is a mile from the Detroit church.

I've watched my neighbor and families on my street get saved."

In Tallahassee, Fla., the Chi Alpha student group at Florida State University has turned a once-notorious fraternity house

into their headquarters. Mario Solari, 37, Chi Alpha's campus pastor, has dreamed of leasing a building on school grounds, and the opportunity came when administrators shut down a fraternity chapter because of alleged underage drinking.

Chi Alpha received the lease for the property, but when they moved into the three-story, 10,000-square-foot building they found it almost destroyed inside. Fraternity occupants had knocked out walls, sinks and toilets, and desecrated it.

"A lot of what we saw made us sad," Solari said. "My heart broke for these guys because they lived like this."

Solari and the Chi Alpha students rented a Dumpster and paid for eight tons of trash to be removed from the buildings. Then they began remodeling.

Now the building that once hosted extravagant, alcohol-drenched luau parties is the hub of activity for Chi Alpha, which has grown to more than 100 people. Twenty-three students live in the building full-time during the academic year, and Solari's office is there.