

Florida Congregation May Purchase Huge Carpenter's Home Facility

Without Walls International Church in Tampa has opened a 'satellite' church on sprawling Lakeland, Fla., property

An independent charismatic church known for its inner-city work in Tampa, Fla., has joined forces with a renowned Assemblies of God church in nearby Lakeland to pool resources for reaping a greater harvest in the region.

Based on a cooperative arrangement announced in July, Without Walls International Church (WWIC), a 14,000-member, nondenominational urban congregation in Tampa, united with Carpenter's Home Church (CHC) in suburban Lakeland, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

CHC once boasted 5,000 members but now has about 1,200 people in its 10,000-seat sanctuary on Sundays. Under the partnership, WWIC started holding weekly services at CHC in August, a prelude to possibly purchasing the building, considered in 1985 when it opened to be one of the largest sanctuaries in the world. Lakeland is about 45 minutes east of Tampa.

Leaders say the arrangement is not a merger and that both churches intend to keep their individual identities. They noted that the plan—which they call the Coalition of Compassion—allows the two congregations to “share facilities and pool their outreach and mission efforts to reap a greater harvest.”

"Promotion of the two entities working as one can become a phenomenon of end-time unity and of grace," said Karl Strader, 72, CHC's pastor for 35 years. "[Our] coming together will be a nonlegal, but cooperative, fellowship that will in no way be competitive, but will be complementary."

Strader told Charisma that the idea inconspicuously began in March during a T.D. Jakes conference at CHC, which featured WWIC husband-wife pastors Randy and Paula White. "They were on the platform, and I kiddingly said to Randy, 'You guys need this building over in Tampa for as fast as you're growing.'"

WWIC pastoral administrator Jennifer Mallan said White was instantly excited by Strader's idea. A few days later, he contacted Strader about starting a satellite WWIC congregation at CHC. After about 90 days of discussions, the two ministries agreed to the deal, which will feature three phases.

"During every conversation, there was a green light and a check by each sign," Mallan told Charisma. "What evolved was, 'Let's take your strength and merge it with our strength.'"

In the first phase, the Whites began conducting Saturday night services at CHC. WWIC, which remains open in Tampa, also assisted CHC in evangelistic and community outreach programs, targeting urban and minority neighborhoods.

As early as February, WWIC hopes to purchase CHC's \$13 million auditorium for an undetermined price to complete phase two. In the third phase, CHC could decide to build a new 2,500-seat sanctuary on property near its Christian school and day care.

"We're flying a jumbo jet that's only half-filled, and that's

not good stewardship. We want to see that place jumping," Strader told The Lakeland Ledger, noting that CHC still owes \$5 million for the building. "This will fulfill every dream I've ever had. Who cares who gets the credit? I want Jesus to get the credit."

Strader's congregation has gone through ups and downs. In 1989, a year after its massive sanctuary opened, about 800 members split from the church in a dispute over his leadership and formed Victory Church.

In the early 1990s, CHC was the site of meetings by Rodney Howard-Browne, the South African preacher who introduced the "laughing revival" to the United States. But Strader's son Daniel was arrested in 1994 on fraud charges and convicted the year after of swindling investors, including some church members.

WWIC, on the other hand, has been on the upswing since the Whites began it with five members in 1991. The racially diverse congregation—known for its numerous outreaches and ministries to the community—has 82 affiliate churches nationwide.

Strader has known the Whites for 11 years. He said he has not received "one negative reaction" over the coalition. "Everyone is really thrilled and positive," he said. "It's going to be an adventure. We believe it's never been done before."

Mallan added: "The Whites' No. 1 goal in this is to honor pastor Strader. They want to lift his arms in the winter years of his life and the winter season of ministry. He had a vision for something way before his time, and the Whites want to help

fulfill his dream. That's why we believe God's hand has been on this."

Eric Tiansay