

Florida Ministry Purchases 75-Acre Carpenter's Home Church Campus

Considered the fastest growing church in the U.S., Without Walls International planned to finalize the \$14 million deal in August

Three years after it first entertained the idea, a large charismatic church in Tampa, Fla., has purchased the property of what was once one of the largest church facilities in the world.

On June 14, Without Walls International Church (WWIC), a 22,000-member nondenominational congregation, signed a contract to buy Carpenter's Home Church (CHC) in suburban Lakeland, which is about 45 minutes east of Tampa.

In the \$14 million agreement, CHC would receive \$8 million plus a 3,000-seat auditorium in Auburndale, Fla., which was used by Without Walls Central (WWC), a satellite of the Tampa congregation. The Auburndale church has been appraised at nearly \$6 million, WWIC officials said. Auburndale is located about 25 minutes east of Lakeland.

"I think it's a win-win for everyone," said Randy White, who pastors WWIC with his wife, Paula. "Carpenter's Home Church gets an almost brand-new sanctuary debt-free. We get a facility that we can grow into. It's been our dream and ambition to impact the state of Florida."

CHC's spokesman Greg Gillman called the sale "a great win in the kingdom of God." CHC is affiliated with the Assemblies of

God (AG). "There are many wins in this arrangement," said Gillman, CHC's CFO and treasurer. "First and foremost, the grounds and buildings that pastor Karl Strader have ministered on for over 20 years will continue to be used to spread the gospel, which is the legacy of our pastor."

Under Strader, the First Assembly of God of Lakeland built a 10,000-seat sanctuary in 1985 at a cost of \$12 million, renaming the church Carpenter's Home in the process. At the time, CHC had about 5,000 members, a TV ministry and a radio station. But in 1989 about 800 members split from CHC in a dispute over Strader's leadership and formed Victory Church.

In the early 1990s, CHC was the site of services by Rodney Howard-Browne, the South African preacher who introduced the "laughing revival" to America. But Strader's son, Daniel, was arrested in 1994 on fraud charges and convicted the following year of swindling investors, including some church members. The congregation of Strader, 76, who has served as CHC's pastor for the last 38 years, now attracts only about 750 people on Sundays.

In contrast, Church Growth Today, a megachurch research center, recently named WWIC the nation's fastest growing church. White said the ministry has 15,000 members in 240 satellite congregations across the U.S. and in Europe.

WWIC was close to an agreement to buy the CHC sanctuary in 2002, but in February 2003 CHC reportedly rejected a \$10 million offer from WWIC because the board was asking \$12.5 million, The Tampa Tribune reported. White said CHC contacted him in the spring to see if WWIC was still interested in the 75-acre property.

"We're extremely excited to acquire this property," said White, 47, noting that he expected to finalize the deal on the Aug. 1 closing date. "We believe this is part of God's plan. Several years ago, prophet Kim Clement saw Carpenter's Home filled to capacity. He said one day we would own the property."

The agreement calls for a one-year transition period during which CHC would continue to hold worship services in a theater on the campus. Without Walls Central will worship at the massive CHC sanctuary starting this fall.

WWC pastor Scott Thomas, 38, will lead the Lakeland congregation, White said. Launched in January 2004, WWC started with 115 members, and it now has 1,500 people attending Sunday services.

Gillman said CHC owns the property, not the AG, adding that voting members approved the sale. "Pastor Strader has notified the Assemblies of God concerning the sale of our property," he said. "We will continue to be Assemblies of God."

Gillman added that the sale will enable CHC to move into a new era of ministry. "Prior to the congregation approving the sale of the property, pastor Strader cast a dynamic vision of raising up young pastors and planting them in multiple locations, providing them with the wisdom of his years and the resources necessary for them to be successful," he said. "The sale of our property will provide Carpenter's Home the unencumbered, debt-free resources that are critical to make this vision a reality, as well as provide a beautiful campus to a congregation of like faith."

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