

Florida's 'Church Without Walls' gets a building

THE GROWING INNER-CITY CONGREGATION GUTTED A HUGE WAREHOUSE TO MAKE IT A CENTER FOR SPIRITUAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

A fast-growing Florida church with a reputation for tearing down walls of poverty, racism and denominational divides in the inner city by introducing the gospel in unique ways is enlarging its tent stakes of ministry.

This past spring, Without Walls International Church (WWIC), founded by the husband-wife pastor team of Randy and Paula White in 1991, moved into a new 5,000-seat sanctuary. Previously the church, located in south Tampa's business district, did not have a permanent building for worship.

The new facilities, purchased for \$8 million, will help the church expand its ministry of evangelism and restoration. Another \$4 million was spent on renovations. The sanctuary is housed inside a 125,000-square-foot warehouse formerly used by Canada Dry as

a distribution center.

Randy White, 42, said the rest of the warehouse will be converted to a 70,000-square-foot facility to be called an economic empowerment center (EEC). White envisions more than 70 businesses being launched in the next eight months from the EEC.

"The church provides the facility, and the congregation will build businesses there," Randy White said. Possible businesses include a travel agency, a fitness center, and shoe-shine and car-detailing shops.

He also noted that negotiations are under way to acquire a 300-room Days Inn hotel located next to the church's 15-acre property, which has been appraised at more than \$20 million. The hotel, which will be converted into a convalescent home, would add to the church's already impressive inner-city ministry.

Before moving to the sanctuary, the now 10,000-member congregation worshiped in a small storefront, a high school cafeteria, a tent and a giant dome called a "superdome"—an air-conditioned, inflated dome made from parachute material.

WWIC bills itself as a "vegetable soup" church because it comprises various ethnic, economic, racial and social backgrounds.

The church currently runs 245 outreaches and in-house ministries. Included are teams that take Sunday school to public-housing projects and hot meals to the homeless.

Yet the church's most valuable resource is its manpower. Although it has only 24 paid staff members, it enjoys help from some 330 full-time volunteers who donate 10 to 40 hours a week to care and minister to more than 10,000 people in need.

The church ministers weekly in 18 of 24 inner-city neighborhoods in Tampa and recently launched its first "hope station" in one of the neighborhoods. The hope station—an

apartment house manned by church volunteers—provides food, clothing, medical and spiritual help. Plans include setting up a hope station in each inner-city neighborhood.

“What we do here is very transparent and real,” Randy White told Charisma. “We’ve learned you can’t expect people to listen when they have empty bellies or when their children don’t have shoes on their feet. You have to meet physical needs before people can focus on spirituality.”

Last fall, the church successfully lobbied the Tampa City Council to pass an ordinance to ban contact between table dancers and patrons at adult clubs. The issue garnered national attention as news coverage noted the church’s involvement in the issue. As a result of the church’s efforts, some 50 dancers who were forced out of their profession attend the church, which now includes a ministry for ex-strippers and ex-dancers.

The church is also expanding beyond local outreaches. There currently are 34 satellite churches that have been planted since 1994. Locations include London and New York, and White hopes to plant the next satellite church in Los Angeles within the next eight months.

The pilot for a new TV show for women will be nonreligious in format, although Without Walls’ ministries will be highlighted, said Paula White, who will be hosting the program. The show will be directed at general and Christian markets and is tentatively slated to air by the end of the year. The church already has a TV ministry, which features preaching and testimonies.

“Our philosophy is to celebrate the Lord and to receive instruction on how to minister to the community and the world,” she said.

Despite the church’s current \$7 million debt, Randy White wants to be debt free within the next eight months.

“Because of the way we teach the spiritual principle of sowing and reaping, we have raised up 17 multimillionaires since the church started in 1991,” he said. “We’ve taught our people to give. It really creates wealth. That’s why I feel confident that we will be debt free.”