

North Carolina Church Converts Strip Mall Into Massive Ministry Center

A 250,000-square-foot shopping center houses retail stores, social services and outreach ministries

There is a sense of elation that often overcomes First Assembly of God pastor Sam Farina whenever he peers across Highway 29 from his church's parking lot. Just over this major business corridor in Concord, N.C., northeast of Charlotte, is The Village Shopping Center, a 250,000-square-foot strip mall the church owns.

The Village, acquired for a bargain price of \$9 million in a foreclosure sale in March 2001, has afforded Farina's church an opportunity to be in the vanguard reaching Cabarrus County in a unique way, by not only engaging in retail, but also providing community services and meeting local spiritual needs.

"The excitement and elation I feel is to see the potential of people being touched," Farina said.

Tenants such as Big Lots discount store and Subway sandwich shop are The Village's primary magnets for retail, but the rent collected helps fund church and social-service programs.

First Assembly already has converted sizeable suite spaces into rooms that accommodate its burgeoning outreach ministries. The most notable is Suite 15, a former department store that is now First Assembly's smaller sanctuary. It seats about 600 people. Other ministries operating at The Village

include a missions office, and the church's child-care center and prayer room.

"With the purchase of a former shopping center, First Assembly is aiding our city leadership in revitalizing a crucial crossroads area of our city into a viable, exciting place where groups of all religions and various denominations can be served," Mayor Scott Padgett said.

By 2004, the middle section of the mall will be transformed into First Assembly's new main sanctuary, which will seat about 2,500 people—almost doubling the current sanctuary capacity of 1,400. The projected cost is about \$13 million, according to First Assembly Director of Development Tom Ramseur.

"It seems unconventional, but First Assembly has been known to do things in an unconventional way," said Ramseur, a former Cabarrus Regional Chamber of Commerce CEO and a current member of the Cabarrus County Board of Social Services. "We have a standard for growth, evangelism and outreach."

Farina said he has studied similar projects in other states where churches have acquired major properties used for secular purposes and converted them for ministry. "If [the church] is going to prove [its] worth to the community, the state—and even have a tax-exempt status—we have to meet the needs of all the community," he said.

Farina said plans for The Village include converting a former Winn-Dixie supermarket—about 45,000 square feet—into a community center that will include a children's library sponsored by Cabarrus County and a free dental clinic for

children. A home healthcare center and urban distribution center are expected in that space as well.

"If the church was doing its job we would not be needing [departments of social services]," Farina said. "We're excited about being able to create and develop a piece of property that would fulfill community needs, spiritual needs and retail."

The concept for The Village, Farina said, is taken from Isaiah 61:4. The prophet declared that God's people would help rebuild a desolate place in ruins. In this case, the strip mall was not in ruins, though it was in foreclosure almost three years ago.

"That could have become a huge eyesore to the community," Farina said. "It could have ended up as a flea market. That is not going to happen."

Farina said his predecessor, founding pastor Tom Whidden, wanted to purchase the same property about 25 years ago from its original owner, Charles Cannon, who amassed his fortune in textile.

Most of the 45 acres that were to be developed were zoned for a shopping center. An adjacent tract was to be used by the City of Concord's fire department, but the land had a steep drop-off.

"One of the things [the city] found out was it had to move about \$1 million of rock," Farina said.

That rock was used to help build First Assembly's parking lot in its current location. "So that was a real blessing," Farina added. "And now we own the land where the rock came off. God has a way of saying if that's the piece of property you want, I'll develop it and give it to you."

Cedric Harmon in Concord, N.C.