

Sad Day: A 10,000-Seat Charismatic Church Building Will Be Torn Down

In 1985, *Charisma* ran a cover story about Karl Strader with the headline: "This man stepped out in faith and built a 10,000-seat church in a city of 58,000."

Now, only 30 years later, the Carpenter's Home Church building, which cost \$9 million to erect, is being torn down and the property will be converted into a retirement facility.

When we covered this story, I knew the church and its history well. I grew up in Lakeland and was a teenager at that church—then called First Assembly of God—when Karl Strader became pastor in 1966. I saw the church grow during the heyday of the charismatic movement and Jesus movement. Back in that era, it was one of the largest and most respected churches in the Assemblies of God.

So I was sad when a relative emailed the online article from *The Ledger* newspaper (where I interned as a reporter) saying a developer had decided to tear down the massive worship center.

Although it's the end of an era, the story is not all negative. Maybe it shows that overbuilding is never wise, and no matter how successful a church is today, there is no way to know what the future holds. Meanwhile, several thriving congregations grew out of what was once Karl Strader's congregation.

After having outgrown two previous sanctuaries, in 1982 the church bought 488 acres on the north edge of Lakeland for \$7.8 million from the Carpenters' Union, locally called The Carpenters' Home—hence the name of the church. The church

quickly sold off 300 acres along a major highway that today is full of shopping centers and car dealerships, and started construction on the 10,000-seat auditorium. It sold its original location to Family Worship Center, pastored by Reggie Scarborough, which today has 3,500 members.

Never afraid of controversy, Strader brought some flamboyant speakers in his pulpit in the 1970s and 1980s like Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart and T.D. Jakes, all who drew huge crowds. The church was also venue for huge Christian concerts for singers such as Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith and Steven Curtis Chapman.

✖ When Strader was featured on the cover of *Charisma* magazine we reported that the total project cost \$12 million. That was a lot of money back then. It was interesting for me to pull out that article and reread it.

“Although it sometimes has immersed him and his church in unwanted controversy, Karl Strader never has been afraid to step out in faith and befriend the unwanted, welcome the outcast, dream the impossible or stand up for what is right. In the process, he’s built an enormous church on the grounds of an old carpenter’s home retirement center in a small city almost in the shadow of Walt Disney World,” the article reported.

Then in 1989, the church had a well-publicized split over Strader’s leadership and reports surfaced that some members objected to charismatic elements in services. Another church—Victory Assembly, pastored by Wayne Blackburn—started only a few miles away. Today, that church’s membership has reached 3,000, according to Wikipedia. Following the split, Carpenter’s Home attendance dropped to about 1,800, and the church never seemed to recover.

At the time, the Assemblies of God denomination conducted an investigation into complaints and news reports about

“spontaneous dancing, singing and an emphasis on prophecy,” *The Ledger* reported. The denomination took 18 months to investigate and found nothing to be out of line.

Meanwhile, Strader’s family suffered tragedy when the youngest son, Danny, was convicted of a white collar crime after a highly publicized trial, and he is still in prison. During that era, the church continued to decline. Even with 1,800 members, the 10,000-seat sanctuary looked empty when I’d visit, as I often did.

By 2005, the church was not able to pay its bills because it did not have enough members in the congregation to sustain a 10,000-seat auditorium, and so Carpenter’s Home Church was sold to Without Walls Church in Tampa, pastored then by Randy and Paula White.

The Whites renamed the church Without Walls Central Church. Meanwhile, the existing Carpenter’s Home Church membership split into two churches—Ignited Church and Auburndale Life Church.

Later, amid mounting debts and other problems, Without Walls Central Church closed and the 10,000-seat facility became “an abandoned building” until the recent sale.

“We’re disappointed that the building and the property has been lost to the kingdom of God and that it’s not going to be used for spiritual purposes or kingdom purposes,” says Karl’s son, Stephen Strader, who today pastors Ignited Church in north Lakeland.

“I hate to see the building torn down, but the building is not the church,” Karl Strader, 85, told *Charisma*. “The people are the church, and they are in about 12 different churches in Lakeland now. It’s painful to see the building torn down, of course, but I’m not groveling on the ground because of it or putting ashes on my head. I just thank God for being involved in it for (nearly) 40 years.”

The church and its successors have also been associated with several revivals, including the Howard-Brownes' extended meetings in the 1990s and the "Florida Outpouring" (or Lakeland Revival as it is also known) in 2008 with Evangelist Todd Bentley.

"When I wrote the book *The Lakeland Outpouring* in 2008, we did the research and discovered there had been 12 major moves of God that had either been birthed at the First Assembly of God and Carpenter's Home Church under my dad's ministry or were amplified through my dad's ministry," says Stephen Strader.

"As examples, the prophetic movement, the worship movement—both received a national boost when it began to happen at Carpenter's Home Church. Rodney Howard-Browne had three or four years of revival across the U.S., but when he came to Carpenter's Home Church it just blew up globally. You can go back through 12 different movements from the Word of Faith to the healing movement with Benny Hinn. Benny Hinn was coming to Carpenter's before he (became well-known)."

Stephen Strader estimates hundreds of thousands of people came to know Jesus directly or indirectly through the ministry of Carpenter's Home Church. I can testify that my life was impacted and my view of the charismatic renewal of that era was shaped by what I saw and learned from Karl Strader.

Looking back on his years of ministry, Strader, who now lives in The Estates near the church he pastored for four decades, says he's thankful for all that God did.

"We were part of the Jesus movement and the charismatic movement from 1966 on," Strader says. "We had people coming to the church from under the bridges where the homeless lived and people driving down from Tampa and from Sarasota. We ended up on national TV for several years. So God had a wonderful impact. I just tried to yield to God so I give Him all the credit for anything that was accomplished."

When the church was built, "I'm sure no one foresaw the problems that resulted in the church split or the dwindling membership.

Time has shown the church building was too big for a town the size of Lakeland. Even back in the early 1980s, the church was growing so much the leadership must have thought it would continue forever. But it didn't. In fact, I doubt the 10,000 seats were ever filled. Other large churches need to learn from this and not overbuild.

For all his amazing leadership abilities, Karl Strader often was at odds with his own denomination and other churches in town. He wasn't intimidated and I'm sure he felt he could survive all the problems, many of which weren't his fault. Yet some of these problems have come home to roost. Leaders must know they can't go it alone in the body of Christ.

So, a great church closes its doors. Yet other great churches exist in Lakeland as a result. It was probably inevitable that such a massive church structure would eventually be impossible to fill.

Yet through it all, Strader had been a man of impeccable character who has never seemed to waiver in his love for the Lord. And in the end, isn't that what's important?

Final note: This report began with us reporting nationally what *The Ledger* reported in Lakeland about the decision to tear down the sanctuary building and to turn the 1920's era "Carpenters Home" (which had been remodeled into a school) back to retirement villas. I know there is more to the story than what I had the space to include here. I also know there are "two sides" to every story. So I reached out to my longtime friend Stephen Strader (who I've known since I was in junior high) to read over my report to be sure all the facts were right. His reply was so interesting I decided to include it as a link for any readers who would like more behind-the-

scene information from the Strader family's point of view.

Steve Strang is the founding editor and publisher of Charisma. Follow him on Twitter @sstrang or Facebook (stephenestrang).

Troy Anderson, executive editor of Charisma, and Bob Cruz contributed to this report.