

Randy White's Church Aims to Turn Bankruptcy Into Blessing

Always known for reaching out to the community, Without Walls International Church is halfway toward its goal of liquidating property to satisfy debt and allow a fresh start.

Without Walls International in Tampa and its sister facility, Without Walls Central Church in nearby Lakeland, are being forced by the U.S. Bankruptcy Court to liquidate both properties, whose owners have fallen millions of dollars into debt. Future uses of the property could include more than 550 multifamily units and commercial use on the 13-acre Tampa site and offices, other commercial use or another religious facility on the larger Lakeland property, said David Bradshaw, whose Ocala, Florida-based real-estate firm is handling the auction.

The bankruptcy court on Friday afternoon, June 27, affirmed that a sale of the Tampa property to an undisclosed buyer could go ahead because it satisfies terms of the bankruptcy, said John Barber of Tranzon Driggers, the Ocala real-estate broker. That leaves only the Lakeland property to be auctioned on July 7.

Bishop Randy White, lead pastor of Without Walls, discussed the sale with his congregation at a service Thursday night. Friday morning, he released a statement to Charisma News through a spokeswoman but was not available for an interview.

"The [Tampa] building is not being auctioned. Our church members know that it has been sold to a buyer, and they are happy about it," White said. "This sale will retire all debt, and we [will] be paying cash for our new property/location."

The sale of the properties could release a blessing both to

the church in that relief from debt could allow leaders to “focus on their core mission of serving their members and the community” and for both communities by opening up valuable real estate to new development, Bradshaw says. He expects the sale of both properties combined could yield \$10 million or more.

The property occupied by Without Walls Central was better known years ago when it was Carpenter’s Home Church, an Assemblies of God megachurch founded in the early 1980s and pastored by Karl Strader. The main auditorium could seat nearly 10,000, and the church became the largest between Tampa and Orlando. But it closed after attendance dwindled to 1,000 making it impossible to maintain the large facilities. Much of the loss in membership was attributed to a financial scam perpetrated by Strader’s son Daniel, who stole \$3 million from investors, mostly Carpenter’s Home Church members. Daniel Strader was convicted in 1994 and is serving a long prison term. A bid for clemency was denied in 2006.

In its heyday, Carpenter’s Home Church hosted concerts by such major Christian recording artists as Michael W. Smith, Steven Curtis Chapman, TobyMac and Petra. It also was home to a 16-week revival in 1993 led by South African evangelist Rodney Howard-Browne that drew thousands of people a night.

A year ago, church officials had high hopes of emerging from foreclosure to not only reopen the Lakeland church but also to add a school. Nearly a year before that, lead pastor Randy White, who had just returned after a three-year hiatus, talked of even bigger plans to add a restaurant, cinema, condominiums and possibly even a Christian theme park to the 63-acre lakefront property on the north side of Lakeland, a city roughly halfway between Tampa and Orlando. But the church was never able to overcome mounting debt to the California credit union that holds its mortgage, and the electricity was turned off more than once. The Lakeland church has been closed for about three years; the Tampa facility remains open for

services. A closing date for the sale announced this week has not been disclosed.

White and his then-wife, Paula White, founded the Tampa church in 1991 and expanded to the Lakeland site in 2002, first on a rental basis before purchasing it in 2005. Randy White led the church until 2009, when he left citing health issues that turned out to include drug addiction, a problem that apparently developed after the death of his daughter. The couple had divorced in 2007, and Paula White, now an internationally recognized evangelist, author and TV personality, moved to the Orlando area at the beginning of 2012 to take over leadership of New Destiny Christian Center several months after its pastor died.

Bids are to be submitted by July 7, and the sale could be concluded two days later—subject to the approval of the bankruptcy court. The Tampa property, which has now been taken off the table, is close to Tampa International Airport and the Interstate 275 interchange with Dale Mabry Highway, a major thoroughfare.