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Home away from home

Providence sets up among retailers while new church is built

By Jeff McDonald
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD-LEADER



Don Thornton recently entered Providence Christian Church at its temporary location, a storefront at the Brannon Crossing Centre.

The beleaguered shopping center. If you've seen one, you've seen them all --drab architecture and the requisite line-up of chain stores scarcely seem to fluctuate from community to community.

But in Jessamine County's Brannon Crossing Centre, along a strip that includes a video game store, a carpet outlet, a nail salon, a sandwich shop, and a payday lending store, you'll find Providence Christian Church.

"The shopping center is a temporary location for us while we're waiting for our new building to be completed," said the pastor, the Rev. Gerald Johns, who has led the congregation since 1995. "We're in a smaller space than we're used to, but we're learning how to share. For the most part I'd say that the transition is bringing out the best in us."

But change did not come easily for a church steeped in history and tradition that had been planted in virtually the same spot on Nicholasville Road in northern Jessamine County for nearly 200 years.

Beginning in 2005, Providence Christian Church found itself in the middle of a dusty and noisy construction zone that was to be known as Brannon Crossing. The church's scant 3 acres seemed dwarfed by the 92-acre development around it.



Charles Slack of Lexington, left and Harold Waits of Nicholasville helped clean up as construction of the Providence Christian Church continued in Nicholasville.

antiquated knob and tube type. The exterior brick needed repointing. If we got a heavy rain, our fellowship hall was flooded. There were also some plumbing issues, and the sanctuary was in need of remodeling."

Adding insult to injury

In summer of 2006, with the future path of the church uncertain and emotions running high among the membership, the old church suffered additional misfortune.

"When scrap-metal prices shot up last year, we were hit hard by the copper thieves," Johns said. "They broke in and stripped out all of our wiring and piping. Here we were in the hottest time of the year with no air conditioning. We had cords running all over the sanctuary for all of the fans that members brought in to cool us off."

The church was at a crossroads, wrestling with whether to make the best of its long-established property or relocate to a place with more room to grow. Then word came that Bellerive Development, the corporation behind Brannon Crossing, was interested in buying the church property.

"At first I felt bad when I thought about leaving the old building," said member Marti Bullock. "But I realized that my grandparents had gone through the same thing.

My grandmother was board secretary at the time when the old church was dedicated."

Bullock's family ties to the church go back to the early 1800s when some interested locals met at Waveland, the home of Daniel Boone's nephew, Daniel Boone Bryan, to discuss the need for a church in the Brannon Road area.

"They faced the same kind of emotions and questions that we have now about leaving their old church home," she said. "This will be the fourth building for the church and each time there were people that were in favor of moving, and there were those against it. It sounds corny to say, but Providence is the people, not the building."

Providence property committee chairman Charles Slack said the decision to move came after some thought and tears.

"There was a lot of history in the old church, and there were some tears when we started talking about leaving," Slack said. "But from a property management point of view, we were in a poorly insulated, deteriorating old building."

"Nearly every system in the church was in need of replacement or overhaul. The wiring was the

Ultimately, a deal was struck with Bellerive Development that included trading the precious Nicholasville Road frontage for a cash sum and 8 acres adjacent to the planned residential section of Brannon Crossing. As part of the negotiations, Bellerive Development agreed to give the church a temporary home in a freshly built storefront until the new church was completed.

"It was a blessing to move into a clean, new, air-conditioned space," Johns said. "We've had to adjust to losing some space. We've also had to adjust to losing a few members, but I respect their feelings, and I hope that we'll see them again in the new church."



The Reverend Gerald Johns played guitar during a Sunday service at Providence Christian Church in its temporary home at the Brannon Crossing Shopping Center.

Senior members of the church have enjoyed the accessibility of the temporary church.

"We've had older members in worship that we had not seen in years," Johns said. "In the old church, the only way to get to the fellowship hall was a staircase, so now many are grateful to just be able to attend a fellowship dinner again."

Accessibility was a primary concern when planning for the new church.

"Everything is on ground level, except for the youth loft," said Slack, who is also enthusiastic about other features. "There will be a family activity center that can also be utilized as a full-size gymnasium. In our old location we were landlocked. Now we'll be surrounded by plenty of parking and room for future expansion."

"We want to continue to be a vital part of our existing church family and to reach out as a community center for the 1,600 homes that are going up in Brannon Crossing over the next three years."

In homage to the old church, the new 18,000-square-foot structure will contain familiar design elements.

"It's not a radical change," Slack said. "We've incorporated the four columns like we had in the 1917 church, and we're reinstalling the stained-glass windows."

June bride

Earlier this month Danielle (Sidebotham) and Jason Rutherford exchanged wedding vows in the temporary church.

"We were concerned how it would look inviting our family and friends to a wedding in a shopping center," said Danielle, who grew up as part of the Providence congregation.

"We began looking at other churches in the area with Jerry, but nothing felt right. It was a hard decision, but the more we thought about it, we just kept coming back to Providence. It didn't feel right to do it anywhere else because it didn't feel like home, like our church."

Although Mike Wade has a church home, the Nicholasville firefighter sometimes finds the temporary church convenient when he's on duty at Station No. 3 on Sundays. Like minutemen ready to leap into action, he and the crew sit in the back of the church with one ear on the sermon and the other ear tuned to their scanners.

"The shopping center allows us ample room for the truck to maneuver quickly in and out," Wade said. "We're right off of U.S. 27, and it's nice to occasionally get a chance to hear a service."

The congregation hopes to be settled into its new home at 101 Providence Way by October of this year.

"The church is a bit out of its comfort zone now," said Michael Davison, associate regional minister for the Christian Church in Kentucky. "They made a clean break with lots of history. Now they are in a strong position that will benefit future generations. The transitional location has a lot of visibility. A lot of people are walking in that wouldn't have normally come into the old building."



The next location for Providence Christian Church is on 8 acres at 101 Providence Way in Nicholasville; adjacent to the planned residential section of Brannon Crossing.

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The history of Providence

Providence is a member of the Disciples of Christ denomination that was sparked by firebrand evangelists Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell and their involvement in the early 19th-century Great Awakening at Cane Ridge.

Today there are about a million Disciples of Christ in North America.

The congregations have been housed in four different churches, all in the Brannon Road area, since it was founded.

Here's the history of those buildings:

1817: A group local leaders met in Waveland to discuss the need for a church in the Brannon Road neighborhood. The wooden meetinghouse constructed at 4648 Nicholasville Road was destroyed by a tornado in 1849.

1850: Church rebuilt with brick and stone structure on same property. That building served the congregation until 1917. The building still stands and is currently occupied by Clairebourne Antiques.

1917: A brick structure at 4650 Nicholasville Road served the congregation until it was demolished in 2006. Red Robin Restaurant now occupies the lot, now at 101 E. Brannon Road.

2006: The church is now in a temporary location in Brannon Crossing Centre, one of the fastest-growing shopping plazas in Jessamine County. The address is 262 E. Brannon Road.

2007: The congregation is expected to move into a new building at 101 Providence Way, across from the AmStar theater, in October.

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