

THE ADVOCATE

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Foreclosure looms at church Solutions sought to save "absolutely incredible" building

Advocate - Baton Rouge, La.

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Church Point Ministries, once a rising evangelical star, has fallen into financial difficulties and is set for a Dec. 1 foreclosure on its Tecumseh Street property.

Founded by Bishop Dwight Pate as an outreach ministry for addicts and troubled individuals in a Scenic Highway car lot, Church Point Ministries once attracted a congregation of 3,000 people.

The church peaked in 2000 when it filled its 85,000-square-foot facility, the former site of Istrouma Baptist Church at 3000 Tecumseh.

Its congregation has dwindled to 300 people, who worship in the kitchen because the church can no longer afford the \$5,000 monthly utility bill to warm and cool the sanctuary.

The church is also in default on its mortgage payment to Bank One, which is owed \$979,000, according to a foreclosure suit filed in state district court.

Developer Howard Gyler, who has purchased and redeveloped property at Melrose Place, said he was recently approached by Ernest Johnson, a member of the church and state director of the NAACP, to negotiate with the bank to find some kind of solution.

"I'm trying to do what I can to help the church," Gyler said. "I understand Pate became ill and the congregation dwindled to 300."

"My goal is to creatively find a structure where this church continues to be there, continues to serve the needs of the community and has an opportunity to re-grow their congregation," he said.

The church is holding services once a week. It will be auctioned next month at a Sheriff's Sale.

A call to the church Thursday was met by a recording that Church Point Ministries is "going through a reorganization." The voice mailbox was full. Johnson also could not be reached for comment.

Bank One spokesman Chris Spencer said he could not comment on the bank's contract with the church because of privacy reasons.

He added that the bank "begins on foreclosure proceedings only after we've exhausted all options."

Bank One has suspended foreclosure once already, he said. According to the foreclosure document, Church Point has been in default since Oct. 15, 2003.

Gyler said he offered the bank \$50,000 to take over the note, which was declined. "We also offered to pay off the entire loan, but without interest, over 30 to 40 years," he said.

Another suggestion was to find another use for the property, which would require more time.

Gyler said the church, in a poor neighborhood, is a magnificent old building with beautiful stained glass that would be vulnerable to vandals if it is left empty.

"If you go out and see the property, what you're going to see is an absolutely incredible church," he said.

Pate started Church Point Ministries in the early 1980s. He eventually acquired an empty church building at 3053 Oswego St. for \$100,000 and grew his congregation there to 1,200 members.

In 1992, he acquired the former Istrouma Baptist Church for \$1.5 million. Istrouma moved to a site off Airline Highway at Interstate 12.