

Shuttered stores find new life as churches

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HUNTLEY, Ill. (RNS)—At Prime Outlets in Huntley, Ill., a former fine china store will become the home of Christian Life Church.

“This provided an opportunity, from moving from being kind of a homeless church, if you will, to find a home,” said Pastor Daryl Merrill, whose church had been renting space weekly at a hotel as it started an off-shoot of the main congregation based in Mount Prospect, Ill.

The tough economy may have shuttered some retail stores, but vacated spaces aren’t necessarily remaining empty: some are becoming new locations for worship. Churches have considered former big-box sites, closed auto dealerships and mall locations—all with room for their members to worship and park their cars.

At Prime Outlets in Huntley, Ill., a former fine china store will soon become the home of Christian Life Church. (PHOTO/RNS/Courtesy Daryl Merrill)

Experts say it’s a potential win-win situation for churches that want to have a location they can use every day—rather than once-a-week arrangements at schools or hotels—and property owners having trouble finding new tenants, not to mention shoppers.

“This has been an opportunity for churches to seize upon, with the drop in commercial real estate prices and eagerness for commercial real estate owners to get anybody, somebody, to occupy their facilities,” said Jim

Tomberlin, senior strategist with Third Quarter Consulting.

His Scottsdale, Ariz., firm recommends churches seeking additional sites for sanctuaries to consider what commercial real estate is available for purchase or rental. Existing buildings prevent a church from having to pay for land and build on it, he noted.

“This is why healthy, growing, aggressive church leaders are seeing this as a huge option on the table that didn’t exist a few years ago,” said Tomberlin, a former megachurch pastor who helped Willow Creek Church in Barrington, Ill., develop multiple worship sites. “You could have a nice, commercial facility ready to go for a church for under \$2 million.”

Some churches are opting for renting rather than purchasing retail space. At two Prime Outlets—one in Illinois and one in Florida—congregations have gone that route.

Rick Feder, general manager of the outlet mall in Huntley, said the Christian Life Church will use about 4,000 square feet of former commercial space. He expects the church will help build the number of shoppers that visit the mall during its two-year lease period.

“These are trying economic times for retail uses, so I think it’s all what’s beneficial to the property,” said Feder, whose mall currently has 42 stores and several spaces available. “It’s one of those things where we tried to do something outside the box.”

At Prime Outlets in Florida City, Fla., general manager Al Dos Santos has a similar philosophy. The mall south of Miami signed a new two-year lease with Torre Fuerte Homestead Church in April when the church moved from one location in the mall to another that can better accommodate its growth.

“For the church, it provides them with adequate space within the shopping center setting, which gives them convenience,” he said. “For us, it’s just

occupying space that otherwise would be sitting empty.”

Pastor Jose Santiago of Torre Fuerte said the church occupies a total of 6,000 square feet, including a former home decor store, for a sanctuary that will seat up to 300, and an additional once-vacant space for children’s ministries.

Larry Ortega, a commercial real estate veteran in Phoenix, said he recently accepted a \$1.3 million deal for a church to purchase a 16,000-square-foot former drugstore in Mesa, Ariz., a site that sold for twice the price as little as three years ago. He’s also working with a church on the purchase of a former auto dealership in nearby Scottsdale.

“Now, all of a sudden, there is an opportunity for churches, if they have a strong membership or they’ve been looking at building a new facility,” he said. “They are buying a facility for the price that they used to buy just the land.”

Larry Maison, ministry operations director at Highlands Community Church in the Seattle suburb of Renton, Wash., said his congregation has been negotiating with the owner of a former grocery store because the church has run out of parking, and its classrooms are full.

“We need something like 14,000 square feet,” he said. “Where are you going to find 14,000 square feet? Where we’re at, that kind of space is not available except for in an empty box. That may be in a former retail store.”

As Maison put it, “Sometimes someone else’s misfortune is somebody else’s golden opportunity.”

The use of former big-box stores is not new with the current economy. Julia Christensen, author of the 2008 book *Big Box Reuse*, has chronicled the increasing appeal of these spaces for everything from the Spam Museum (at a former K-Mart in Austin, Minn.), to an indoor go-cart track, to a

Florida church that swapped a former Winn-Dixie grocery store to a former Wal-Mart.

“I think we’ll see the fallout from this in the coming months and years, but it’s not like Linens ’N Things goes out of business and a church buys it and moves in the next day,” said Christensen, a visiting assistant professor of the emerging arts at Oberlin College in Ohio. “It takes a while.”