

Church opens in former Deja Vu strip club

By Jeanne Houck

jhouck@communitypress.com

"... they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength..."

Isaiah 40:31 (King James Version)

Members of the Full Gospel House of Refuge were growing weary of their small, storefront accommodations in what the locals call downtown Mt. Carmel.

Church secretary Timothy Thoma says God told him and other members who'd been worshipping in a building on Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road for seven years to stop looking for a new building and to trust that it would appear.

So when Union Township officials approached the Full Gospel House of Refuge about leasing with an option to buy the former site of the Deja Vu strip club, right around the corner at 516 Old state Route 74, the non-denominational Christian church considered it a message from Heaven.

"The beauty of this story is we have been search-



Thoma



Cox

ing for and praying for a new building for some years," Thoma said, adding that he gets goose bumps every time he tells it.

"The Lord told us to stop looking. That we wouldn't find the building, the building would find us.

"We listened to the Lord, and the Lord came through for us," Thoma said.

The Full Gospel House of Refuge was able to go one better than what the Union Township officials proposed.

The church bought the single-story stucco building from the Union Township Community Improvement Corp., the township's economic-development arm, for \$300,000 last December.

The Full Gospel House of Refuge has renovated

just over 9,000 square feet of the building, which now holds a sanctuary that can seat some 160 people, two Sunday School classrooms, a large fellowship hall, a kitchen, restrooms and a pastor's office, said Thoma, who is serving as project manager.

It is definitely not Déjà Vu all over again, although YouTube videos of the church's grand opening service June 29 show dancing will not go the way of Déjà Vu, which agreed to close up shop at the end of 2011 in a plea deal made after employees were convicted of illegally operating a sexually oriented business.

In the videos, Pastor Robert Cox hoofs it up in the Full Gospel House of Refuge's new sanctuary as attendees sing and clap to old time gospel songs — no hymnbook needed.

A white-haired elderly lady in a white crocheted sweater is one of the people who appear irresistibly drawn to the front of the church to jump, swing and sway with Cox as a guitarist and drummer keep the music moving.



Full Gospel House of Refuge is opening in the former Deja Vu strip club in Mt. Carmel. JEANNE HOUCK/THE COMMUNITY PRESS

Thoma said the public is invited to services Sundays at 2 p.m. and Tuesdays at 7 p.m. at the Full Gospel House of Refuge, where you better be able to back up any spiritual beliefs you have with text from the Bible.

"We are a non-denominational church because denominations were created by man," Thoma said.

"Our purpose is to serve the community and provide a foundation for salvation."

The property already has nearly 220 parking spaces.

Now, it also has a large

sign in front with a cross and the face of a concerned-looking Jesus marking the building as the Full Gospel House of Refuge.

Earlier this year, Phil Burress, president of Citizens for Community Values, presented Union Township Administrator Ken Geis with an award for his role in shutting down Déjà Vu.

Burress said his group, formed in 1983, shut down strips bars and porn shops in downtown Cincinnati and helped pass a state law that said the businesses could not operate be-

tween midnight and 6 a.m. and that dancers could not touch customers.

"As a result of that, we've had over 100 sexually oriented businesses close in the state of Ohio," Burress said.

But when his group targeted Déjà Vu, called Rumors when it opened in the mid-1990s, "We just couldn't gain any headway," Burress said.

Burress said he contacted Geis, who worked with a team of police, prosecutors and township trustees.

Their efforts to regulate sexually oriented businesses with local laws launched court battles that Union Township did not always win.

The criminal charges that led to Déjà Vu leaving Mt. Carmel stemmed from a 2010 Union Township Police Department undercover sting.

In 2012, after Déjà Vu left, the Union Township Community Improvement Corp. bought the Old state Route 74 property for \$300,000 — the same price it charged the Full Gospel House of Refuge.

Index

Calendar B2
Classifieds C

BRIEFLY

Summer Crisis

of Community Assis- 18-20.

