

Religion and real estate are in his blood

By Jeff Kunerth, *Orlando Sentinel*



Matt Messier has a church for sale. It sits off State Road 434 about halfway between the Winter Springs town center and downtown Oviedo.

The location is excellent. The lobby is spacious. The sanctuary seats 350. The acoustics are perfect. Messier claps his hands together to prove it, and the sound amplifies in the empty sanctuary.

There has never been a better time to buy a church, Messier says: low, low interest rates and rock-bottom prices. And there may never be a better time to be Matt Messier.

Last year's distressed real-estate market, he said, was one of his best for CNL Specialty Real Estate Services in Orlando. Growing churches looking for larger buildings, shrinking churches looking for something smaller, financially successful churches looking to upgrade, bankrupt churches facing eviction.

"In today's market, you are seeing where churches, like many people or businesses, were in expansion mode a few years ago and now can't make their payments," said Messier, 48, who specializes in church property just as his father did before him. "We are seeing more and more foreclosed church properties."

Messier heads the eight-person church-and-school real-estate division for CNL, which sells churches nationwide. The division's real-estate agents have about 120 churches for sale across the country, Messier said. About half of Florida's 20 churches for sale are in the Orlando area.

Just how many churches Messier sold last year is classified company information, a CNL spokesman said, but one of them was a 300,000-square-foot mega-church outside Atlanta.

There are some real-estate agents who specialize in selling restaurants and others who know warehouses. Messier, a stout man in black-rimmed glasses and a sweater vest, is the go-to guy for religious properties.

"In Central Florida, Matt Messier is the guy who sells church property," said Dan Holland, pastor of Metro Church in Oviedo.

Metro Church owns the facility Messier is selling just a mile down the road. It belonged to another congregation that merged with Metro about four years ago. The property, listed for \$1.9 million, is too close to Metro to serve as a satellite campus and too far to be an extension of Metro.

When the decision was made to sell, Holland said, Matt Messier was the logical choice. He knows his niche, he knows the area, and a religious man himself, he knows the emotional entanglements between a congregation and its house of worship.

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"When you are selling a church, people don't view it as bricks and mortar. They look at it as a place where their daughter got married or where they held their husband's funeral," Messier says. "Selling a church is an extremely emotional endeavor."

Church real estate is a difficult market. Though churches occupy all types of buildings — store fronts, shopping centers, warehouses, houses, theaters, schools, fraternal lodges — there are only two primary buyers for church property: other churches and schools.

To expand the pool of potential buyers for Orlando church buildings, Messier's faith-based realty office has a nationwide data base of religious denominations, foundations, investment funds and church-planting organizations, including the names and numbers of those responsible for real-estate decisions.

And he knows these other guys in Detroit who are in the same church-brokerage business: his brothers. Church real estate became a family business when his father, Richard Messier, started 40 years ago in Detroit. When Richard moved to Central Florida in 1983, Matt followed him. Richard Messier sold the business to a developer who then sold it to CNL four years ago. Matt Messier came along to run the division.

Last year, Messier was hired by the Congregation Ohev Shalom to sell its Orlando synagogue because it was building a new facility in Maitland. Messier matched them up with the Calvary Chapel church that had been looking for the right property for years.

"He's a very spiritual man. This is what he is called to do, and he does it very well," said Calvary Chapel Senior Pastor Gib Allen. "We never felt like he was just in it to make money."

The synagogue and the church worked out a sales agreement that allowed the Christians to move in before the Jews moved out.

For the synagogue, which expects to move into its new temple near the Jewish Community Center in May, Messier found the right buyer at the right time.

"We were taking a risk putting it up for sale," said Bill Sholk, who headed the synagogue's sale committee. "If we sold it too early, we would have to rent somewhere else. Or it might take a long time because church financing has become harder and harder to get. It was a perfect match for us."

In the past, Messier and his father sold Jehovah's Witness halls to Sikhs and Sikh temples to Korean Baptists. But for Ohev Shalom, the sale of its synagogue to Calvary Chapel has a certain full-circle symbolism.

Founded in 1907, Orlando's oldest Jewish congregation had its first home in a former church on Church Street.