

Now showing

New church debuts in Old Orchard Theater

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Chris Cramer, pastor of the new Orchard Grove Community Church, hopes people line up for worship services as readily as when the Old Orchard Theater showed movies and dished out the popcorn.

"We are open to everyone. You don't have to be dressed up. You don't have to have your act together," said the Westland resident, formerly the youth pastor at Detroit World Outreach in Redford.



"That keeps a lot of people from church — that they have to get it together before they come. God put on a human body so he could relate to us."

The new church opened in the vacant theater building on Orchard Lake Road, just north of 12 Mile, a couple of weeks ago. "We have

New: Pastor Chris Cramer graduate from Central Bible College in Missouri.

a month-to-month agreement with the owner," Cramer said.

An application has been made to the city of Farmington Hills for a change in occupancy, as required, Cramer added.

Dale Countegnan, Farmington Hills community development director, said that a church is allowed in the office district in which the theater sits. "The

only issue will be whether the church uses or plans to use the land on the other side for a playground for kids or something like that. They have to go to the planning commission to use that property."

The acreage on which the theater sits has been the center of some controversy as owner Ari Leibovitz of Ari-El Development has attempted to have property he owns in the adjoining subdivision rezoned from residential to parking. The city council and planning commission refused. And so has the Zoning Board of Appeals. Leibovitz, who specializes in revitalizing commercial property, says that without rezoning development would be costly. The ZBA's denial allowed Leibovitz to sue city in Oakland County Circuit Court.

The next step in the lawsuit is for the city to respond to Leibovitz's legal allegations.

"The city has met with residents to keep them abreast of what's going on," Countegnan said.

Residents on Park Hills behind the theater have opposed Leibovitz's attempts to rezone the property for parking, which the developer claims is necessary to redevelop his 8.5 acres.

Leibovitz did not respond to the Observer's inquiries. He also owns bank property immediately north of the theater.

Meanwhile, Cramer and his colleagues are using two of the theaters for church activities. Painting is the first order of business. A church member who is a painter, brought Cramer two colors from which to choose: pearly gates and divinity. Maybe it was coincidental.

"We chose divinity. But not for any spiritual reason. We just like the color," Cramer said, adding the lighter-colored walls will brighten the interior. In another theater, the church's youth plan to renovate the area for their programs.

"We are looking for a more permanent location," Cramer said. Church members previously met at West Bloomfield High School. Besides the fact that the old theater was empty, Cramer and his friends who started the church thought Farmington Hills was a good place for a new church.

"This is a highly populated area but it does not have a high percentage of church attendance," Cramer said.

The church already has some 90 members of all ages. And a nursery has been started for families during services. In the lobby of the theater where patrons stood in line for popcorn and other treats, Cramer has set up chairs and tables for coffee and socializing



Relevance: That's what Pastor Chris Cramer is trying to bring members of the new Orchard Grove Community Church now housed in the former Old Orchard Theater.

following services.

The church was born of a need for relevancy in today's living. "New churches tend to do better," Cramer said. "They are a little more open, a little more growth minded. Relevancy. That's the big difference. This is a church that will meet you where you are."

That, Cramer said, is as opposed to more traditional religions, such as the Catholicism in which he was raised. "Jesus liked to stay in touch with ordinary people."

The services — one at 10:30 a.m. Sundays, and another at 7 p.m. Wednesdays — are contemporary. "We have singing, music, a live band. The music is very lively and the worship is very expressive."

Working on a sermon about the 10 Commandments, Cramer said he planned to tell members

that the rules are standards for success.

"Everyone thinks of them as weights. What I'm talking about is that they give you wings. I'll talk about the importance of fidelity; the importance of rest. God's word is very practical and it works today. The principles are the same today: Treat other people with respect."

Cramer's purpose is to help people develop their relationship with God, without restrictions that accompany many traditional religions. "Jesus interacted with people. I try to think how Jesus would approach it. I see him working hard to be relevant. Often people forget the teachings of God and hold on to the traditions of man. Tradition doesn't mean a lot here."

But youth does. And the relevancy Cramer is

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