Decaying church finds new life as reception hall

The former St. John of the Cross Catholic Church, now a reception hall in the LeBlanc community near Abbeville, is often used for weddings.

**Born-again mission**

Custom-fit windows replaced shattered glass panes and rusted frames. Alineas, Sweet Bay Magnolias and other lush landscaping bloom where weeds once stood as marionettes guarding the sealed doors of a decaying church.

Owner Marilyn Crain calls the 5,000-square-foot structure surrounded by a 6,000-square-foot manicured courtyard L'Eglise. It's a reception hall in the LeBlanc community near Abbeville set up for weddings, receptions, conventions, meetings and other large events. Grand opening ceremonies will begin at noon Saturday.

Despite the improvements and a new name, nearby residents see only the glorious St. John of the Cross Catholic Church they once knew and loved.

"It's a wise choice, instead of letting it go to waste. I feel lucky that she's doing something with it," said Agnes Bares Richard, 61, who lives about four miles away just off La. 339, a bilane asphalt highway that splits sugar cane fields and rows of aging homes about 200 yards from the former church.

Richard was one of the church's original parishioners who conducted bazaars and sold chicken salad sandwiches, gumbo and jambalaya to raise the funds needed to build the church in this rural community. To kick off the fund-raising efforts, five local men — Henri LeBlanc, Edler Bares, John Bares, Cleveland Richard and Alvin "Doc" Richard — each donated a cow to be used for a barbecue dinner sale one summer Sunday.

"Ladies who lived nearby made quilts. Others gave chickens and rice for gumbo and jambalaya dinners we would sell to raise money. We worked like Trojans," Richard said.

The church, consecrated on Sept. 14, 1962, was built on land donated by the LeBlanc family who lived in a nearby plantation house built in the 1800s. It was a mission of the St. Anne Catholic Church in Youngsville until the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lafayette was forced to close it in 1973 because of a shortage of priests, Richard said.

"It was so sad. We worked so hard to build that church," said the grandmother of 15 and great-grandmother of 16.

It's that sense of community and emphasis on family that Crain said she wants to keep alive in the renovated church.

"This building meant a lot to the people who live in the surrounding community," Crain said. "It was the center of their lives. It still smells like a church. It's kept that aura. I want it to continue being a place of joy and happiness."

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**Want to go?**

Renaissance LeBlanc, & celebration commemorating the 50th anniversary of the former St. John of the Cross Catholic Church, will be held at noon Saturday at the former church near Abbeville. For more information, call Agnes Richard at (337) 837-5053 or Joan Bernard at (337) 893-8466.