

# Continuing their mission

*Closed church properties find new life as affordable housing*

By Genevieve Rajewski

**Brookline, Mass.** – After a long and sensitive community-review process, the church of former President John F. Kennedy's baptism and childhood will soon be the focal point of a much-needed mixed-income development. St. Aidan's is one of several former parish properties being redeveloped as a result of a unique public-private partnership.

The Planning Office of Urban Affairs (POUA), the Archdiocese of Boston's housing-development affiliate, took control of St. Aidan's in November and expects to begin construction this spring. Fifty-nine units – nearly 85% of them affordable – will be built on the 1.84-acre property and in the church itself.

Designed by renowned architect Charles D. Maginnis and built in 1911, the Tudor-style church has been listed on the U.S. and state registers of historic places since 1978. St. Aidan's is also one of several neighborhood sites visited by more than 20,000 people each year through Kennedy family tours led by the U.S. National Park Service.

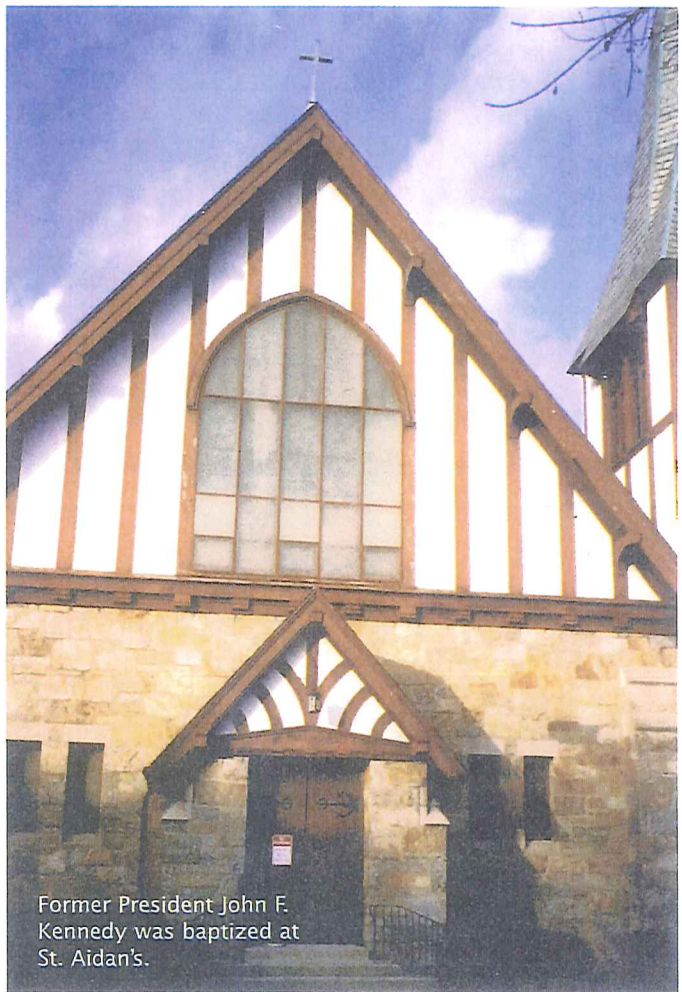
Through the late 1990s, the Archdiocese consolidated or closed nearly 50 parishes and churches because of the same problems affecting dioceses across the country – too many churches with too few priests to staff them and too few parishioners to support them.

In 1999, St. Aidan's was merged with another local parish. Soon after, the Archdiocese agreed to sell the property to the POUA, which began cooperative discussions with the town of Brookline. The talks led to an unprecedented 30-month public-review process, including a "friendly" Chapter 40B zoning process now considered a valuable model.

"We initially planned to demolish the church," said Lisa Alberghini, executive director of the POUA, but "many local residents believed that it was important to keep it for its historic value, and we agreed to do that."

However – as is the case with many older churches – the developer found it would be financially unfeasible to adapt the stone-and-stucco structure for affordable housing.

"To have made it economically viable, we'd have to put a lot of units in there," said Alberghini. "And the more units, the more openings you have to create for windows and doors, and the more you are changing the building's character – which is exactly what the neighborhood didn't want."



Former President John F. Kennedy was baptized at St. Aidan's.

Instead, the developer decided to build nine market-rate condominiums in the church and use the proceeds to subsidize the construction of three new buildings on the site. An existing rectory and garage will be demolished and a large parking lot redeveloped to create two townhouse-style structures with seven first-time-buyer units each and a 36-unit apartment building. Residents will be able to walk to the shops and public transportation in the Coolidge Corner section of the affluent town.

Although the church's appearance will change, the develop-



er worked closely with the town's Preservation Commission to minimize the impact on its two most prominent façades and to preserve an existing forecourt with a 150-year-old beech tree.

Key to St. Aidan's \$26.3 million financing package are a \$15 million construction loan from FleetBoston Financial, \$2.2 million in low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) equity from Massachusetts Housing Investment Corp., the town of Brookline's \$3.5 million investment from a locally capitalized trust fund, and state funds.

Wainwright Bank & Trust Co. will provide \$3.5 million in construction financing and a \$900,000 permanent mortgage that will be supported by a subsidized loan from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston's Affordable Housing Program (AHP). Wainwright Bank also won a \$300,000 AHP grant on behalf of the development.

However, the project's financial feasibility also depended on a public-private partnership that began in 2000, when Fleet provided a \$50,000 grant to the POUA to fund a study on the housing-affordability problem in Greater Boston. When published in February 2001, the report (entitled "A New Paradigm for Housing") called for 36,000 additional housing units – 15,000 of them affordable – to be produced over the next five years. In response, the Archdiocese committed to make some of its underutilized property available for housing.

Meanwhile, Fleet presented the POUA with an additional \$2 million grant, which then leveraged another \$1 million from State Street Corp. The \$3 million working capital investment came in the form of an amortizing grant or forgivable loan.

Thanks to this capital infusion, POUA was able to initiate a five-year plan to boost its production of affordable and mixed-income housing. The developer now has nearly 700 units under way, and many more in the planning stages – a dramatic increase in capacity, given that it had produced only 1,756 units of housing over its previous 35 years of existence.

Of the six projects in development or pre-development, five (including St. Aidan's) are former parish properties.

In Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood, Riley House – an adaptive reuse of the former Most Precious Blood Convent – will provide 42 affordable units for seniors.

In the city's Brighton neighborhood, construction is well under way on the redevelopment of the former Archdiocesan Caritas Christi Hospital site into a 289-unit intergenerational res-

idential campus featuring independent- and assisted-living units for seniors, a skilled nursing facility, family housing, and a residence for people living with HIV or AIDS.

In Lynn, a neighborhood will be revitalized through the redevelopment of the St. Jean Baptiste parish buildings, which – after standing vacant for nearly 10 years – will be razed to make way for the construction of 24 LIHTC rental units, 14 first-time-buyer units and a new community facility.

And in Lowell, a blighted multifamily building next to the St. Patrick's Church will be demolished to allow the construction of a 42-unit affordable residence for seniors.

"Nonprofit corporations like POUA are at a distinct disadvantage in competing for scarce properties in an appreciating real-estate marketplace, due to their limited access to private capital and the complexity of the affordable-housing development model," said consultant Peter J. Roche, principal at Real Estate & Community Development, who worked with POUA to secure its

working capital. Given the "extraordinary investments in time and third-party professional services required to bring a mixed-income project to closing in the Boston area," Roche thinks that POUA's development capacity would have been limited to 50 to 100 units per year if not for that capital.

POUA's increased capacity comes at a crucial time – the Nov. 22, 2003, *Boston Globe* reported that the Archdiocese will likely

close more parishes. It said that many "are too small to survive" and are "housed in old buildings ... too decrepit to repair."

Although parishes help accomplish their mission and receive much-needed revenue by selling underused properties for redevelopment as affordable housing, some people are uncomfortable with churches finding new uses. This was the case for St. Aidan's, which some wanted to see preserved as a church, particularly because of its connections to the late President Kennedy.

However, Alberghini noted that "the church doesn't really view JFK's baptism as any different from anyone else's," and that the building itself has been deconsecrated.

"But more importantly, the best way to honor JFK is to serve those in need by providing them with decent, affordable housing," said Alberghini. "Now, when people come by St. Aidan's, they will see not only where he was baptized and where his family went to church, but the next chapter in that story, which is that we've really acted upon his legacy to continue helping those in need." ■



Tudor-style St. Aidan's is one of several former parish properties being redeveloped for affordable housing.