Facing empty pews, churches are turning their buildings into low-income housing

Congregations from Beverly to Roxbury to Cambridge are opting to transform mostly empty properties into housing for lower income families.

By Andrew Brinker Globe Staff, Updated August 13, 2025, 8:14 a.m.

Michael Fiorentino (front right) prayed with his fellow congregants at the Second Congregational United Church of Christ in Beverly. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

BEVERLY — On a recent weekday afternoon, the Rev. Adam Isbitsky walked through a sea of empty pews, the clack of his footsteps echoing off the high ceilings of the sanctuary at Second Congregational Church.

Not so long ago, he recalled, these pews would fill up every Sunday with hundreds of worshipers. Those days

are gone. As the church's congregation has dwindled in recent years, those who remain made the difficult decision recently to dissolve this 300-year-old institution in favor of a new purpose: services for the homeless.

In a year or so, the congregation has plans to hand over the keys to the building to the homeless nonprofit Lifebridge North Shore, to be transformed into a resource center for the North Shore's growing homeless population.

The decision to close the church was difficult and painful, said Isbitsky, whom the congregation hired last year to be its "legacy pastor," charged with guiding the institution through its dissolution and ensuring an enduring legacy. Deciding what to do with the property was much simpler.

"It is impossible to ignore how difficult it has become to find stable housing," Isbitsky said. "So no one just wanted to stick a 'for sale' sign out front and let someone buy the place. People want to help."

Long a cornerstone of American life, many churches and other places of worship have fallen on hard times in recent years as the number of people attending religious services has dropped steadily. Two decades ago, some 42 percent of Americans attended regular services, according to Gallup. Today, that figure is more like 30 percent.

And while many congregations are significantly reduced, they still own large chunks of real estate — acquired and built out in a bygone era when they needed space for services, schools, and dormitories — that they can no longer afford to maintain.

As they consider their futures, which in many cases include reducing their real estate footprint or even dissolving altogether, congregations from Beverly to Roxbury to Cambridge are opting to transform mostly empty properties into housing for lower income families.

There's even a bill on Beacon Hill that would aim to make it easier.

It's a natural second life for places of worship. Massachusetts has one of the worst shortages of affordable housing in the United States and rising rates of homelessness. And most religions emphasize shelter and helping the needy. Some religious leaders see building new, affordable homes in a state that has too few of them as a modern fulfillment of those moral principles.

"The Bible is pretty explicit about the value of shelter, and importance of helping people," said Isbitsky. "Those are true Christian values."

Second Congregational's church on Conant Street in Beverly was built in 1714, and it shows. The original wooden front door, along with a document signed by the first parishioners, is hidden behind a rickety wooden panel in the sanctuary that Isbitsky can only pry open on certain days. Other pieces of the original sanctuary

remain as well, though the building has been added on to and rotated over the years.

Pastor Adam Isbitsky opened panels inside the Second Congregational United Church of Christ to reveal the church's original wooden door from 1714. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

At its peak, Second Congregational served 750 people, but these days it has just 64 members, most of whom are older. Isbitsky spends most of his time winding through the rooms and hallways of a largely empty building.

As Second Congregational's membership dwindled, its congregation a few years ago came to the difficult conclusion that it no longer made sense for the church to operate. Before long, they had received multiple proposals from groups interested in taking over the building.

One of those came from the homeless nonprofit Lifebridge North Shore, which members quickly identified as the obvious choice. The church has a long history of working with Lifebridge and other homeless groups. Family Promise North Shore, which helps struggling families find homes, has operated out of the Second Congregational basement for years.

“We see homeless people struggling in our community everyday,” said Jack Terrill, a longtime member of the church. “The idea that our church could do something to help people was very popular among the congregation.”

So, pending approval from the public charities division of the attorney general’s office, Second Congregational will hand the building over to Lifebridge in a year or so. It’s essentially a charitable donation, which the nonprofit plans to use as a services center for the local homeless population that will complement its nearby shelters.

LifeBridge is still figuring out exactly what to do with the space, said executive director Jason Etheridge. It won't be an overnight shelter, but the building is big enough to support numerous services like casework and food distribution. And it's a bit of a full-circle event for the nonprofit: LifeBridge was formed as a soup kitchen by the old Crombie Street Congregational Church in Salem in the late 1970s.

The pipeline of places of worship being transformed into housing is growing quickly, and some policy makers are hoping to speed it up. A bill in the Legislature — designed to mimic other "Yes in God's Backyard" bills that have passed in California and elsewhere — would make it easier to build on properties owned by religious groups by allowing developments between 30 and 50 units per acre by right, without special local approval.

In a state with exorbitant land prices and a general shortage of places to build in the urban core, the large real

estate footprint of many religious groups represents an opportunity to make a dent in the state's housing problem, said state Senator Brendan Crighton, who represents Lynn and cosponsored the "Yes in God's Back Yard" bill. The Archdiocese of Boston and other Catholic churches in particular have a large portfolio of properties that could be redeveloped.

In Roxbury, St. Katharine Drexel Parish has plans to transform the land behind its Parish Center near Ruggles into a mixed-use complex that will include 217 apartments and condominiums, most of which will be set aside at affordable rate, and retail and community space.

The project, which the church will call Drexel Village, is being built by the Planning Office of Urban Affairs, a nonprofit development arm of the Archdiocese of Boston.

The motivations for the project were many, said the Rev. Oscar Pratt, the pastor at St. Katharine Drexel.

The first is that the project will help sustain the church financially and will include a full renovation of the aging parish center.

But Pratt has also watched out his office window as this corner of Roxbury — near the bustling corner of Tremont Street and Melnea Cass Boulevard — has been transformed in recent years with shiny new apartment buildings with market rents that his congregation, most of whom are longtime Roxbury residents, cannot afford. Building affordable housing, he said, is a way for the church to provide homes "in Roxbury, for people who live in Roxbury."

"This is a social justice enterprise," said Pratt. "We want to make sure that we, the community, isn't going anywhere."

But turning old church buildings into apartments can be logistically challenging.

In East Cambridge, for example, nonprofit developer Preservation of Affordable Housing recently began work transforming the rectory, school, and convent buildings of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church into affordable housing. It'll put 46 affordable units into the complex, which covers a full block near Kendall Square, while maintaining the historic brick shells of the buildings, and preserving the still-open church itself.

Because the buildings were originally laid out for other uses, each apartment the developer builds will be different, and won't stack symmetrically from floor to floor, as apartment buildings typically do. Many apartments will, though, have the old stained glass windows.

Congregants embraced during the Passing Peace portion of the Sunday service at the Second Congregational United Church of Christ in Beverly. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

There are other hurdles, too.

When news of the Lifebridge project in Beverly reached the public, some residents were outraged, saying the center would be a danger to the community. At one public meeting, residents yelled over Isbitsky and at Mayor Mike Cahill, though in this case, anyway, the town does not have jurisdiction over the project because it is a transaction between two nonprofit entities.

“I don’t have anything against the homeless … but I just see more and more coming [to the neighborhood],” one resident said. “And they’re not all nice.”

When Isbitsky wanders through the empty rooms and hallways of Second Congregational, he thinks about the word “legacy” a lot, and what churches should mean to communities in a new era when fewer people actually attend them.

“It used to be that people in need would go to the church to find help when they had nowhere else to go,” he said. “For us, that is still going to be the case, even after the congregation is gone.”

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