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Closed churches get new uses

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien



This 2009 file photo shows construction to convert the former St. Aidan Church in Brookline, Mass., and an adjacent building into 59 units of mixed-income housing. It is also the former parish church of the Kennedy family and the church where John F. Kennedy was baptized. (CNS/Courtesy of the Boston archdiocese)

When Sherry Charlesworth was looking for a new location for her embroidery business, her primary criteria were size and location. But the spot she found had an unexpected history.

Beginning in May, Charlesworth's Monogram Shoppe will be housed in the former St. Mary's Church in Little Valley, N.Y. It won't look much like a church, with even the stained-glass windows coming out. But it will nevertheless hold the history of a parish established in 1874.

Elsewhere in the Buffalo diocese, the former St. Frances Cabrini Church in Collins Center, N.Y., retains its stained-glass windows and even a confessional and some of the pews. But the basement where chicken dinners were once served now houses a state-of-the-art audio and video recording studio, and a vibrant ministry called Quiet Waters brings in local Catholic young people and adults for concerts and summer camps, live theater based on rosary meditations, homeschooling conferences and other events.

"For us, it was huge that it was a Catholic church," said Tracy Tremblay, the president of Quiet Waters who bought the property three years ago with her husband, Phil. "It would not have the same kind of aura if they had bought another type of building, she added.

The two former churches are among 75 closed in recent years by the Buffalo diocese and sold to a wide variety of buyers. As dioceses around the country consolidate parishes, hundreds of churches, rectories, schools and church halls are being quietly sold -- although most have not been as successful at it as the Buffalo diocese.

"We've been surprised to be able to make so many sales in this economy," said Kevin A. Keenan, director of communications for the Buffalo diocese. Since March 2006, the diocese has sold 40 properties, raising \$5 million for the parishes that had been responsible for the upkeep of the closed buildings.

Decisions on selling the church buildings and the sacred objects contained in them remain with the church communities into which they were consolidated, Keenan told Catholic News Service.

"From our standpoint, if a parish merges with another parish and has to pay for upkeep, it stands to reason that if they have incurred any debt, [the sale proceeds] go to pay those expenses," he added. For poorer parishes that cannot afford to pay to maintain other properties, the diocese has a \$2 million contingency fund, Keenan said.

More than a third of the properties have been sold to other religious organizations, including two that became Buddhist meditation centers and one that is now a mosque, weekend school, Muslim prayer hall and community center.

The buyers sign covenants restricting use of the buildings for the next 50 years. They are not allowed to use the property as an abortion or family planning clinic, fortune-telling establishment, charter school, unsanctioned Catholic church, or as a nightclub, bar or restaurant that serves alcohol. They also are prohibited from any use that "would bring discredit, ridicule, criticism and/or scandal upon [the property's] history and tradition or upon the Catholic church."

Keenan said Buffalo Bishop Edward U. Kmiec's primary concern has been that any sales "benefit the community in which they are located."

The towns of Hinsdale and Sheridan each bought a local Catholic church. The former St. Helen Church in Hinsdale is becoming a museum and the church hall a food pantry, while Monroe Bishop, the town justice, and his wife, Jo Ann, are converting the rectory into a residence. In Sheridan, the former St. John Bosco Church properties will be used as a town hall, court and offices.

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At the former Assumption Parish in Portageville, the church -- with stained-glass windows intact -- is now a 175-seat catering hall, while the rectory has become the four-bedroom Heaven Sent Bed and Breakfast.

In a strategy called "preservation by relocation," parishioners at Mary Our Queen Parish in Norcross, Ga., are raising money to buy the former St. Gerard Church in Buffalo and ship it, marble block by marble block, 1,000 miles to the Atlanta suburbs.

Relocating the 98-year-old church from Buffalo will cost an estimated \$15 million. Estimates of what it

would cost to build a church of a similar style at today's prices top \$40 million.

Other former church properties in the Buffalo diocese are being used as a religious arts museum, an antique store, an artist retreat facility, office space, social services centers and private residences.

Conversion of former parish properties to housing has been a major emphasis in the Boston archdiocese, where 63 parishes were closed in 2006.

The Planning Office for Urban Affairs, an archdiocesan agency whose founding preceded the parish closings, has created 2,400 units of affordable and mixed-income housing for more than 10,000 people, with another 300 units in development.

The former St. Aidan Parish in Brookline, Mass., for example, has been turned into a development that includes 20 affordable rental units, 16 first-time-homebuyer units and 23 market-rate condominiums. Retained on the site was a 150-year-old copper beech tree with a half-acre canopy.

The St. John of God development, made up of seven buildings on the site of the former Caritas Christi Hospital in Brighton, Mass., includes housing for seniors, mixed-income assisted living with a dementia care unit, a nursing home, a residence for people with AIDS or HIV, family housing, and a neighborhood park.

In March the Boston archdiocese announced that it would give the former St. Kevin's Parish property in Dorchester to a partnership of three Catholic ministries that will develop permanent housing for families served by St. Mary's Women and Children's Center, which provides emergency and transitional housing and other support services to vulnerable women and children.

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