

How Congregations Are Increasing Affordable Housing and Addressing Unhoused Populations

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly of the PC(USA) approved recommendations in the report “From Homelessness to Hope: Constructing Just, Sustainable Communities for All God’s People,” including “Encourage congregations, presbyteries, synods and other church-related entities to pursue comprehensive responses to the crisis of homelessness and affordable housing.” The PC(USA)’s Matthew 25 vision also calls us to be actively involved in the world around us in eradicating systemic poverty, dismantling structural racism and building congregational vitality. With diminishing affordable housing options across much of the United States, many congregations are considering ways to affect change by utilizing untapped resources such as land. The following are a few examples of congregations and communities of faith thinking creatively about land use and building a more just community for all.



Westminster Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., discovered that the equity of their property had grown due to the location’s demand. Westminster decided to build a new building, and later the church found developers to build affordable housing with the additional equity. Westminster is now co-owner of a 123-unit apartment complex and a church building that, once it’s constructed, will be 2½ times bigger than its current building.

Read more:

<https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2021/3/25/three-churches-share-their-stories-housing-gods-children>



BeLoved Asheville, a Presbyterian Hunger Program grant partner in Asheville, North Carolina, is building a village of 12 microhomes called BeLoved Village. This resourceful solution provides deeply affordable homes where social connection and equity lead to better health, more opportunities and long-term stability. BeLoved Village truly works to sow seeds of community. The 440-plus-square-foot houses are built primarily with donated labor and materials. They’ve also received in-kind donations from architects, engineers, surveyors and other industry professionals. Additional generous contributions from the greater Asheville community have funded more than 70% of the construction cost.

Read more:

<https://belovedasheville.com/projects/belovedvillage/>





In the parking lot of **First Presbyterian Church of Hayward** in Castro Valley, California, a village of five tiny homes is the most visible manifestation of the church's effort to address homelessness. "We've come to the theological place, maybe philosophical, that housing is a human right," said the Rev. Jake Medcalf, Hayward's lead pastor. "If we don't provide housing in our neighborhoods, especially in an area like the Bay, we are literally — I don't think it's dramatic, I think it's real — condemning people to die on the streets."

Read more:

<https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2021/10/18/roof-over-everyones-head>



Many communities are grappling with questions from the safety to the legalities of living in one's car and are creating "safe lots" for the vehicular homeless to park in. Some of these safe parking lots are owned by the Department of Transportation or the Department of Public Health. Other lots are owned by faith organizations, such as **Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church** in Northglenn, Colorado. The Rev. Sheri Fry shared that the process was a months-long effort to convince neighbors that opening the parking lot at night for people to stay safely in their vehicles was a good idea.

Read more:

<https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2019/12/31/california-churches-promote-affordable-housing> & <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2022/11/29/being-matthew-25-explores-innovative-ways-denver-area-churches-are-helping-their-neighbors-housing>



Whether advocating on affordable housing issues or the need to test school water fountains for lead, "there's definitely influence and power when you have a lot of organizations working together," said Pastor Timothy Stern of **Ark and Dove Presbyterian Church** in Maryland. He also noted, "Community organizing is a great way of organizing a congregation" because it involves doing "one-on-one meetings with people so that you can create relational power."

Read more:

<https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2023/2/1/grant-partner-hunger-program-makes-strides-local-issues>

Ideas for congregations:

- Use church buildings to host neighbors experiencing housing insecurity.
- Provide social services and assistance in finding stable housing for neighbors experiencing housing insecurity.
- Donate property for affordable housing.
- Partner with qualified organizations to build affordable housing units on church property.
- Provide church parking lots as "safe lots" for individuals living in vehicles.
- Find, join or form a Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO) team to advocate for affordable housing.

Getting Started:

1. Find out if there are groups working with unhoused people in your area and support or complement their efforts.
2. If there aren't local groups doing this work, begin by listening to and assessing the needs of the community through listening sessions.
3. Contact local and state agencies to get a clear understanding of assistance options.
4. Envision a realistic plan for how church property could be used.
5. Assess the skills in the congregation and partner with knowledgeable people – community organizers, lawyers, builders, accountants, financial partners, community leaders and officials, journalists, etc.
6. Before developing property, assess the value and buildable square footage.

Resources:

Affordable Housing:

<https://www.enterprisecommunity.org/>

<https://www.enterprisecommunity.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Enterprise-Paper-Leveraging-Property-Owned-by-FBOs-January2020.pdf>

https://nhpfoundation.org/documents/NHPF_FaithBasedAffordableHousing_Articles.pdf

<https://naht.org/our-partners/development-partners>

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/hunger/cbco/>

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/homelessness-report2008.pdf>

Find a CBCO near you:

https://www.uua.org/files/documents/aw/cbco_near_you.pdf

Unhoused Services

<https://familypromise.org/what-we-do/programs-services/>

<https://safeparkingla.org/>

<https://www.thepeaceplan.com/4-steps-to-move-your-church-to-address-homelessness/>

<https://nationalhomeless.org/>