

In Nashville, a former Catholic school-turned-swingers club is reborn as a homeless shelter

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [December 2, 2020](#) issue



(Courtesy photo)

The red brick building at the corner of Drexel Street and Seventh Avenue South in Nashville has a colorful history.

In the early 1900s, it was home to a Catholic school founded to educate Black children in Jim Crow Tennessee. By the early 2000s, the building had become a

swingers club.

But in November, it reopened as a faith-based shelter for the homeless, due in part to COVID-19. The swingers club-turned-shelter, now known as Drexel House, is one of a number of pandemic innovations made by faith-based groups that serve the homeless.

More than half a million people experience homelessness in the United States, according to a 2020 report from the National Alliance to End Homelessness. And faith-based groups “provide the backbone of the emergency shelter system,” according to the NAEH.

Many of those groups have faced challenges during the pandemic. Social distancing requirements have reduced the number of shelter beds available and made it harder to deliver services such as counseling and support groups.

Rachel Hester, executive director of Room in the Inn—the nonprofit that bought Drexel House earlier this year—said many of their guests have had no place to go during the pandemic. Libraries and fast-food restaurants, often safe havens from the streets, have been shuttered. Day centers have had to limit the number of people who come inside and can no longer house 12-step meetings or counseling sessions. Older volunteers who once helped out are no longer able to do so.

So faith-based groups have had to get creative.

Room in the Inn got its start at Holy Family Catholic Church in Nashville in 1985. That winter, some Nashvillians who were homeless were sleeping in the church’s parking lot after the camp they’d set up by the Cumberland River was shut down.

Charlie Strobel, the church’s pastor at the time, invited them inside.

Strobel would later send a letter to other congregations in Nashville, asking them to open their doors as temporary shelters. Four churches signed up for the new program, which was christened Room in the Inn after the biblical story of the night of Jesus’ birth.

Eventually, almost 200 congregations joined the coalition, offering a hot meal and a safe place to sleep—often on a mattress in a church gym or classroom—to 1,500 people during the shelter season each year.

COVID-19 has changed all of that.

Many of the congregations that have hosted shelters in partnership with Room in the Inn in the past are still closed down for in-person worship or don't have space for social distancing.

"I have 41 congregations out of 200 that are participating," Hester said.

To offset the loss of shelter space at churches, Room in the Inn is taking a hybrid approach, sheltering some people at churches and others in several central locations, including the gym at a former Catholic school, the second floor of its day center in downtown Nashville, and Drexel House—returning it to its original faith-based identity.

In 1909, the building opened as Immaculate Mother Academy, the state's first Catholic primary and secondary school for Black children, founded by Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

Charlotte West, a longtime volunteer from St. John African Methodist Episcopal Church, is grateful that Drexel House will once again be a place of ministry.

"We are so blessed to have it," she said.

For West and other members of St. John AME, having the central shelter location means their ministry with homeless guests can continue. The church has participated in Room in the Inn since the 1980s. But in March, when a tornado hit Nashville and destroyed their building, they could no longer host a shelter.

Still, West and other longtime volunteers like Erskine Lytle want to lend a hand. They hope to start volunteering at one of the alternative shelters set up by Room in the Inn in a few weeks.

"The need is still there," said Lytle, who has volunteered since 1987.

The Catholic Diocese of Nashville has set up a central site for Room in the Inn at St. Vincent de Paul parish, which was also founded by Drexel. The diocese spent \$50,000 to renovate a space that once housed a gym for a parish school, adding a kitchen and other improvements. That space will now serve as a central location for Catholic parishes involved with Room in the Inn.

The diocese also donated \$50,000 toward the nonprofit's budget, said Brian Cooper, the diocese's chancellor. Cooper, whose family has volunteered with Room in the Inn, said it was important to step up and help during the pandemic.

"Necessity is the mother of invention—the Holy Spirit has guided us," he said. —Religion News Service