

Places of worship tackle the affordable housing shortage

by [Kristi Eaton](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue



The vision for the new housing complex on the site of Southeast Tabernacle Baptist Church in Washington, DC. (Courtesy of Southeast Baptist Tabernacle Church)

The 90-year-old Southeast Tabernacle Baptist Church has been a spiritual refuge in Ward Eight in Washington, DC, for decades. Ward Eight's struggles include some of the highest rates of poverty and teenage pregnancy in the city, according to pastor Donald Isaac.

"We have a very challenging community," Isaac said. "We have been fortunate enough to own an entire block, and we have now undergone a process to develop a project we call the First Street Village."

The plan is to tear down the existing church and replace it not only with a new worship facility but also with nearly 80 units of rental housing and community space. The church's nonprofit partner—East of the River Clergy Police Community Partnership—has received a \$50,000 grant, as well as additional capacity-building grants.

Across the country, faith-based institutions like Southeast Tabernacle are tackling the housing crisis head-on, a movement nicknamed YIGBY: yes in God's backyard. While helping low-income families aligns with the churches' mission, some see it also as a way to attract members and tap into additional sources of income.

One initiative is Enterprise Community Partners, a national nonprofit that describes its mission as making affordable homeownership possible for millions of families, advancing racial equity, and building upward mobility. The nonprofit recently announced \$8.5 million in grants from the Wells Fargo Foundation to help houses of worship across the United States convert underutilized land into affordable homes and community facilities. The funding will help to create roughly 6,000 affordable homes.

Launched in 2006 in the mid-Atlantic region, Enterprise's faith-based development initiative has helped faith-based organizations to create or preserve more than 1,500 affordable homes and one community-based health clinic. Since 1982, Enterprise has invested \$54 billion and created 873,000 homes across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

"This is one creative approach that we have found over the years has some effectiveness," said David Bowers, Enterprise's vice president for the mid-Atlantic market and senior adviser for the faith-based initiative. "We want to continue to expand to help meet the need, as more resources become available."

Places of worship not only provide land, Bowers noted, but also a mission-driven perspective.

"So many people around the country need more affordable housing that is healthy and sustainable," he said. "There's that alignment of mission, to help and to meet the need."

In June 2014, the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University released a study finding that nearly half of all renter households in the United States were cost burdened in 2012.

"The need exists now, it existed yesterday, and it will exist tomorrow to provide more affordable housing to low- and moderate-income folks," Bowers said.

"Unfortunately, this is a prime moment of need."

Eileen Fitzgerald, Wells Fargo's head of housing affordability philanthropy, said in a statement, "As community anchors, houses of worship are at the center of so many lives. Working together, we can bring a whole new level of innovation to the housing supply challenge."

Bowers noted that almost any community has at least one house of worship. "Many of them have land, whether it's airspace in a place like New York City, or acres of land in some locations."

Faith-based organizations that participate in the program will gain access to funding, training, technical assistance, and peer-to-peer learning.

"The training component is really important to lay a foundation," Bowers said. "We will also provide technical assistance so houses of worship will have access to a development consultant, who will work with them to help them build out their development concept."

Isaac hopes other faith-based institutions will follow Southeast Tabernacle's lead. "We hope this is a model for other faith leaders in the District," he said. —Next City. This story is part of the SoJo Exchange from the Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.