

Affordable housing rises where a church building once stood

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...Gilliam Place is an affordable housing complex born of one congregation's quest to discern their calling in a community with changing needs.

The 173 apartments reserved for low-income families, seniors and those with disabilities are the result of a yearslong -- and at times contentious -- discernment process by Arlington Presbyterian Church.

Arlington Presbyterian's stone sanctuary had occupied a lot near a busy intersection west of the Pentagon for more than 80 years. Like many churches, the congregation had seen its numbers dwindle, and its aging infrastructure had become an increasing burden. But what happened

next wasn't driven by finances, said Susan Etherton, a ruling elder and member for nearly 40 years. Arlington Presbyterian could have sold its property -- worth more than \$10 million just a few years ago -- and built a new sanctuary elsewhere, she said.

"We weren't looking to save ourselves," said Etherton, who was deeply involved in the church's effort to discover the community's needs and discern how best to meet them. "It had to be grounded in that spiritual sense of, How is God calling us to be? What can we do, not for people really, but with people? How can we be in relationship with the community by doing something bold and courageous?"

The congregation decided to join forces with the nonprofit Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing, which shepherded the church through difficult conversations with its neighbors -- and plenty of its own members -- as well as negotiations with the local presbytery and the county. The organization then bought the land and constructed a six-story building where the church once stood, with five floors of affordable housing above retail space on the first floor.

Nina Janopaul, APAH's president and CEO, estimates that more than 400 people have made Gilliam Place their home since it opened in August 2019. Hundreds more remain on a waiting list.

It's hard to overstate the need for dedicated affordable housing, Janopaul said. Between 2000 and 2017, Arlington lost nearly 85% of its market-rate affordable housing units, largely because of increasing rent prices.

The entire process for Arlington Presbyterian, according to members, was an exercise in allowing God to reveal their purpose. They now rent space on the first floor of Gilliam Place, but that wasn't a foregone conclusion. After selling the property to APAH, they gave away hymnals, pews and even the church organ, moved into a temporary worship space, and contemplated whether the congregation should continue to exist.