

Campus ministry partners convert congregation's office building into student housing

by [David Paulsen](#)

July 17, 2023



Jacksonville Campus Ministry's new residential space. (Facebook)

Six college students are preparing to move into new apartments in a former office building at [Redeemer Episcopal Church](#) in Jacksonville, Florida, after the church and its ecumenical partners converted the building to living space in response to a local housing shortage.

The project was spearheaded by [Jacksonville Campus Ministry](#), a partnership of congregations from seven denominations, including Redeemer. The Episcopal congregation is closest to the University of North Florida, about five miles away, and employs Sarah Locke as a chaplain for university students. Locke also serves as pastor of Jacksonville Campus Ministry.

Locke has seen the effects of the affordable housing shortage firsthand. “I had known students who were sleeping in cars because it was much cheaper to pay for a parking ticket than to pay rent,” Locke said, adding that the university’s campus housing waiting list was 300 names long at the beginning of the last academic year.

Locke, who was ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, preaches twice a month as assisting priest at Redeemer Episcopal Church under the two denominations’ [full communion agreement](#). Last year, she began talking to Wiley Ammons, the church’s rector, about ways the congregation could support local affordable housing solutions. Their focus soon turned to the office building on church grounds.

A film production company had been renting space in the 3,000-square-foot building from the church, but it ended its lease after the pandemic hit in March 2020, drying up the company’s business. When the congregation tried unsuccessfully to find a replacement commercial tenant, converting the space to residences became a promising alternative.

“There’s a huge housing crisis in Jacksonville and for students,” Ammons said. Redeemer’s former office building only has space to house six students, but “if I could build a dorm for 60, I could fill it right now,” he said.

Ammons and Locke launched the idea at a time when Episcopal dioceses and congregations across the church are looking for ways to respond to the crisis of affordable housing in their communities while also grappling with the expense of maintaining unused or under-used church facilities.

Earlier this year, for example, the Diocese of Los Angeles welcomed the first residents of its [affordable housing complex](#) at St. Michael's Episcopal Ministry Center in Riverside, California, part of a larger diocesan effort to build residential units on 25 percent of the diocese's 133 church campuses. The diocese also recently [hired a director of housing and business development](#) to implement that wider vision.

Jacksonville Campus Ministry's housing project was developed and implemented on an expedited timetable, Locke said, made possible by the overwhelming support it received from Redeemer Episcopal Church and other local partners.

"It has been entirely funded from generous donations," Locke said. "It really has blossomed into something a lot bigger than we thought it was going to be and something that's a lot more beautiful and wonderful than we first imagined."

With a fundraising goal of about \$100,000, the project received \$55,000 in two Lutheran grants, one from the ECLA's [Florida-Bahamas Synod](#) and the other from National Lutheran Campus Ministry. Redeemer Episcopal Church raised \$25,000 from its parishioners by making the project its top outreach initiative for 2023, and the rest of the money was contributed by a variety of other community donors.

Four offices were converted into six bedrooms and the kitchenette was upgraded and expanded into a full kitchen. Two existing half bathrooms were expanded with the installation of showers. The space also now features a shared common area with a TV and couches, dining space, and a laundry room.

Redeemer Episcopal Church will manage the student leases. At \$550-600 a month, the rates are about \$250 lower than what students would pay to live on campus, Locke said, and by generating those rents, the building will again produce revenue for Redeemer.

The congregation will benefit in other ways, Ammons said. Previously the church's facilities had been unused aside from Sunday mornings and some evenings. The presence of student residents means the grounds at Church of the Redeemer will be in use 24/7.

And though the students are not required to join worship or other functions at Redeemer, some already have. Three of the incoming residents have attended Sunday worship with the congregation in recent weeks, Ammons said.

An open house is planned for the new housing on August 5, and students move in on August 15. Ammons is eager to share details of the project with other congregations and campus ministries that might be interested in pursuing similar housing solutions.

“I want churches to know it’s possible and important to do things like student housing or looking at more creative reuse of space,” he said. “There are a lot of churches with idle property.” —Episcopal News Service