

Thursday, January 5, 2012

Chinese congregation buys Our Lady of Fatima Church



Our Lady of Fatima Church (T&G File Photo/PAUL KAPTEYN)

By Bronislaus B. Kush TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Members of the growing Worcester Congregation Chinese Gospel Church received a special Christmas gift this holiday season: A new house of worship.

After months of effort, church officials formally inked a deal with the Diocese of Worcester Friday to purchase the former Our Lady of Fatima Church, which is at 43 Belmont St.

“We finally have the keys to the building,” said the Rev. Timothy Zhiqiu Xu. “God’s hand is truly behind this purchase.”

The Chinese congregation now worships at a church at 21 Belmont St., the former Belmont A.M.E. Zion Church, just off Lincoln Square.

But the needs of the expanding church membership have long outgrown that 7,000-square-foot building.

Our Lady of Fatima, located a couple of blocks away, provided the perfect fit for the Gospel

Church, which is an offshoot of a congregation founded in the early 1980s in Southboro.

The former Roman Catholic Church was closed in 2009 as part of the diocese's ongoing reorganization plan.

In a statement, Bishop Robert J. McManus said that he is grateful that Our Lady of Fatima Church can be utilized by another Christian faith group.

The church was built in 1910 and originally served Lutherans of Swedish ancestry.

Then known as Trinity Lutheran Church, the structure was sold in the 1950s to the diocese.

The purchase of Our Lady of Fatima by the Gospel Church pleased local preservationists, who feared the building might be torn down.

In the spring of last year, the church, which had been on the market for \$1.4 million, had been purchased by 43 Realty Trust in a deal that eventually fell through.

The company had planned to raze the neo-Gothic landmark, which was listed at one time on Preservation Worcester's Most Endangered Structures list, for unspecified reasons.

There were fears the site would become home to a large pharmacy or a parking lot, which would accommodate those using nearby medical facilities.

“It's obviously good news that another church will use the building,” said Deborah Packard, PW's executive director.

Rev. Zhiqui Xu said the purchase was made possible because the diocese dropped the price of Our Lady of Fatima twice.

“The Catholic Church really went out of its way to make sure that another church would buy the building,” he said. “We appreciate what they did.”

Our Lady of Fatima sold for \$675,000, officials said.

“Our goal was to assure that Our Lady of Fatima would be of use to a worship community,” said Monsignor Thomas J. Sullivan, diocesan chancellor. “I am grateful to the representatives of the Chinese Gospel Church for being able to conclude this sales agreement with the Diocese of Worcester with mutually beneficial results.”

Rev. Xu said the congregation hopes to host a dedication service in about two months.

Meanwhile, he said the church's current home is up for sale for \$430,000 and added that the congregation has already received a few inquiries.

He said Our Lady of Fatima needs some repairs to the roof and the west tower, both of which are

leaking.

Rev. Xu said the building will allow the congregation to set up space for classrooms and a Sunday school. It will also double the parking available to church members and users.

The last Mass at Our Lady of Fatima was said in June 2008, at which time the parish was merged with St. Bernard's on Lincoln Street to become Our Lady of Providence Parish at St. Bernard Church.

The net proceeds of the church sale will go to Our Lady of Providence.

As with the sale of all other local Catholic churches sold to non-Catholic entities, the consecrated items, such as the altar and baptismal font, were removed. Those items will now be used at Our Lady of Providence.