

**Tuesday, April 5, 2011**

**Church finds an angel  
Congregation's purchase could keep a historic church standing**



The Worcester Congregation Chinese Gospel Church of Massachusetts at 21 Belmont St. on the left plans to make an offer to purchase Our Lady of Fatima Church at 43 Belmont St. at right. Our Lady of Fatima Church was closed by the Diocese of Worcester in 2009. (T&G Staff/STEVE LANAVA)

**By Bronislaus B. Kush TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF**



T&G Staff/DON LANDGREN JR.



\*for Bronnie Kush story. Our Lady of Fatima Church on Belmont Street. The Worcester Chinese Gospel Church, also on Belmont Street, is making an offer to buy the Fatima church. Monday, April 04, 2011. ((STEVE LANAVA Photo, T&G Staff))

**WORCESTER** — During their 40-day retreat, members of the Worcester Congregation Chinese Gospel Church of Massachusetts prayed and fasted for peace, good health, a better world, fortitude, patience and all the other moral concerns that individuals reflect on during such meditative days.

They also asked the divine that they'd be able to scrape together enough money to find a new home to better suit their growing needs.

Their prayers may have been answered.

Church officials said that the congregation, now at 21 Belmont St., will make an offer next week to purchase the nearby Our Lady of Fatima Church, which was closed by the Diocese of Worcester in 2009.

The bid, if accepted, will also be good news to local preservationists and former members of the church, who were hoping the granite structure would not be torn down.

The diocese last year had signed a purchase-and-sale agreement with a realty trust, which sought approval from the Worcester Historical Commission to tear down the building.

However, the deal fell through and the church, at 43 Belmont St., was placed on the market again.

“The hearts of many people would have ached if that beautiful building were torn down,” said the Rev. Timothy Zhiqiu Xu of the Chinese Gospel church.

The church was built in 1910 to serve Lutherans of Swedish ancestry, who had settled around Lincoln Square. The church originally housed the Trinity Lutheran Church. It was purchased in the 1950s by the local Catholic church to serve blue-collar families living to the north of the downtown.

The chancery shut down the church as part of a reorganization aimed at dealing with a shortage of priests, changing demographics, and dwindling financial resources.

When the deal was reached in June of last year with 43 Realty Trust, the church had been on the market for \$1.4 million.

The realty trust company had planned to raze the neo-Gothic landmark for unspecified reasons.

The commission, utilizing a municipal ordinance, ordered that the demolition be delayed for one year, in the hopes that the church could be saved. The order is set to expire this spring.

Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, which placed the house of worship last week on its Most Endangered Structures List, said housing another congregation was the best possible option for the church.

“It's wonderful that there's a chance this church will serve another ethnic population,” she said.

Ms. Packard said a potential sale to the Gospel Church also shows that the demolition delay ordinance works.

Rev. Zhiqiu Xu said a pledge drive held by the congregation drew enough response to make a bid possible. He said the decision by the chancery to drop the sale price to \$989,000 was also a major factor.

“We're trying to mobilize every financial resource we have,” the clergyman said.

Rev. Zhiqiu Xu said the church's current 7,000-square-foot quarters are inadequate.

He said there's no parking and added that the structure does not allow for a children's school and other activities for youngsters.

Rev. Zhiqiu Xu said his congregation already has 200 members and continues to grow. Additionally, many students from China, who are studying at Worcester-area colleges, frequently visit.

“We're always packed,” he said, noting that 21 Belmont St. only has a seating capacity of 200.

Our Lady of Fatima would double the space for the needs of the congregation.

Rev. Zhiqiu Xu said the parish would keep its current church and rent space to much smaller congregations that can't afford a building of their own. A Brazilian church already uses the facility for Sunday worship.

The Gospel Church was founded in the early 1980s in Southboro, where it operates a church just off Route 9.

Its second church at 21 Belmont St. was opened about five years ago and primarily serves residents of the Shrewsbury-Northboro corridor.

Rev. Zhiqiu Xu said he's spoken to Monsignor Thomas J. Sullivan, the diocesan chancellor, and the chancery's broker about a possible purchase.

He said church representatives have attended open houses and have had an architect inspect the facility.