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Churches get homeless out of cold

by Joe Winter

Stymied by city officials in their attempts to open a homeless shelter, churches in Cudahy, Wis., are opening their doors for all-night sessions that include prayer and scripture study so the homeless can come in and keep from freezing.

A coalition of churches had planned to open a homeless shelter this winter, but the city planning commission rejected their permit application, saying that a shelter, even if only temporary, was inconsistent with local zoning laws.

But the churches that form the Interfaith Covenant Community, including Nativity of the Lord Catholic Church, moved ahead with their plans by offering "warming rooms" that do not officially qualify as homeless shelters and are considered a church ministry.

The warming rooms gave the churches a way to skirt the zoning rules and get the planning wheels moving to create a permanent shelter, said Bev Tryba, a Nativity parishioner who works with the warming room program.

The city has allowed the warming room programs to operate when temperatures dip below 10 degrees.

Cudahy is a town of about 19,000 residents south of Milwaukee on the shore of Lake Michigan.

Eight churches are participating in the program. Each provides shelter on a rotating basis throughout the winter. At least two church volunteers must be present throughout the night to supervise. Those using the warming rooms must be drug-free.

Up to 20 people are allowed into the church sanctuary for the night.

For legal reasons, the churches must offer a "living-room-type setup" inside the church, said Tryba, adding that program officials even have to be careful of the descriptions they use. They cannot set up cots or beds, but their guests can use sleeping bags. The guests have a self-serve breakfast and a take-along lunch when they depart by 8:30 the next morning.

Tryba said that prayer sessions and scripture study are part of the evening's activities. However, the homeless people being served are not pushed to participate in the prayer, sit up straight or even to stay awake. The program just wants to keep them alive.

Tryba said the warming room program is patterned after ones established in Janesville, Wis., and Detroit.

"Three-fourths of the people we serve have been very thankful, marvelous and wonderful. They think this is a good thing and so they wash dishes, clean, and shovel [snow]," she said. The homeless people even keep watch to ensure the rules are followed, she said. "This has become fun and exciting, and people really have become attached to each other."

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Pastors and parishioners make the rounds of the local area -- visiting the library, the community center, a fast-food restaurant and a highway underpass -- looking for people who need shelter. The task can be hard because on cold nights, homeless people tend to be hard to find because they hunker down in a safe place, advocates say.

Assistant City Attorney Jay Unora said that if it's cold enough, he doubts any inspector would shut down an attempt to temporarily house homeless people, in a church or otherwise, unless conditions in the temporary shelter were unsafe.

"The Lord is the Lord, and I don't think he would have us turn people away for any reason," Tryba said.

[Joe Winter is a freelance writer living in Hudson, Wis.]

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