

# Officials question shelter at church

Harvest Community Church may be violating city zoning laws but its pastor says that's just politics.

BY DAVID MCFADDEN  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

WOONSOCKET — Does a church have the right as part of its ministry to provide homeless people with a place to sleep on arctic winter nights when there's a statewide scarcity of emergency beds, even though the church may be in violation of a zoning ordinance?

Pastor Gene Giguere of the non-denominational Harvest Community Church believes so, arguing that providing the downtrodden with a warm place to sleep, which the downtown Woonsocket church has been doing

## Church

Continued from C-1

zoning ordinance by allowing homeless people to spend nights inside the 3 1/2-story North Main Street building. The new church, zoned commercial, opened in October inside the former Parenteau Furniture warehouse.

"Nothing has been done at this point, but we are looking at whether they're in violation of zoning now," Mayor Susan D. Menard said yesterday, adding that the matter came to her administration's attention when two clients of the city's Human Resources Department, which coordinates local social services, were found to have stayed overnight at the church this week.

If Harvest Community Church is in violation of local regulations then the matter must be addressed, Menard said, adding, however, that her administration "certainly doesn't want people sleeping on the streets."

Zoning officer Michael Przybylowicz, who toured the church yesterday, said he would write up a report today to refer to the city Law Department, which would ultimately decide whether the church was in violation, he said.

Church officials said they have averaged six overnight visitors — nearly all men — a night, most of them regulars. Przybylowicz concurred, saying, "It's been just a few people

Przybylowicz said under its current zoning designation, the church could possibly qualify as a community residence if it was shown to be providing "care, assistance, or both" to six or fewer unrelated individuals or three families of no more than eight people for a period of not less than 60 days, but no

longer than two years.

In the building's second-floor children's chapel, where the overnight guests sleep on donated exercise mats, a large storage room contains about a dozen plastic crates marked with homeless individuals' names, stuffed with blankets, sheets and toiletries. Bathrooms and a small kitchen with some food donated by parishioners and local agencies that work with the homeless is nearby.

"The doors open at 7:30 at night and close at 9, and people are off the next morning at no later than 8," said Steve Martel, one of the church's assistant pastors. A volunteer church member stays overnight to supervise, he said. "People have been so grateful. There haven't been any conflicts at all."

But if the zoning question leads eventually to a conflict between the city and the Harvest Community Church, it will not have been the first time.

Last year, the church sued the Zoning Board in Superior Court after the board denied, citing a lack of parking on the property, granting the church's request to locate its ministry in the old furniture store, which had been vacant for years.

The city settled the dispute with the church after local officials decided they would likely be up against the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, passed in 2000, which was designed to protect places of worship from government intrusion and that

ipal zoning boards have over religious institutions.

Advocates for the homeless say that this winter has been

particularly brutal for their clients; shelters across the state have been filled to overflowing for months. Nancy Paradee, deputy director of Family Resources Community Action, which operates Woonsocket's one designated homeless shelter, said that there is currently about a week-long waiting list for single individuals (excluding people who have a felony or their criminal record) to get a bed, which is considered to be quite fast.

The emergency bed crunch is not just in Rhode Island. A U.S. Conference of Mayors survey released in December showed emergency food and shelter requests rose by nearly 20 percent in the nation last year. High housing costs were cited as the leading factor in the spike.

Some other Woonsocket church leaders are squarely behind Harvest Community Church's efforts at serving the poor during a difficult winter. Pastor Brian Souza, of First United Methodist Church, said that his congregation took up a collection recently to help the church with heating costs and the like.

"Churches in Providence have been giving shelter to the homeless this winter without any problems at all," Souza said. "The housing shortage is probably the most pressing issue in the state right now."

Giguere said that the zoning issue is in a "holding pattern" until the city decides whether the church is in violation of local ordinance or not. But "if

ger, we'll oppose this legally and socially.... I can't help but think there's some politics behind the scenes."