



The First Church of Christ in Hartford

A member of the United Church of Christ — founded 1632

An Open and Affirming Congregation

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October 28, 2009

Greetings friends,

Center Church has been approached by the City of Hartford to house a winter shelter for 50 men each night from December 1st 2009 – March 31st 2010, daily, from 7pm – 7am in the basement dining room of our church house (including kitchen and bathroom hall). The Prudential only got most of the details yesterday (Tuesday, October 27th 2009), and has been able to come to their opinion about the matter but believes that the congregation should be involved in thinking about this, discussing this and voting on this, since inviting homeless people to stay in our basement is a big decision that will affect us all.

It will certainly restrict our use of the basement and kitchen. Potlucks and other activities typically hosted downstairs would have to be done in the second floor room. And though the homeless men will be out of the building and away from the church each Sunday, the shelter would remain open and the men would be able to remain downstairs on days that has heavy snowfall or is predicted that morning to have a high temperature of 20F. So, we would feel the squeeze if they had to stay in on a Sunday. The Prudential asks that the congregation please read up on this information we have put together...which is information we did not have to share with you before this time...so that we can complete this learning and decision making process as a congregation. The Prudential Committee had the authority to decide on the matter last night, but agreed that it would be more appropriate and meaningful to involve the congregation by sending out this information immediately, hosting a question and answer session this Sunday at the potluck, and announcing a special congregational meeting for Sunday, November 8th. Though this is not a lot of time to let the information sink in and discuss it, everyone from the members of the task force to the first few committees and staff approached at Center Church has had to sort through this without the luxury of weeks upon weeks of time. The city must have an answer from our congregation by November 8th or 9th.

Attached are two additional documents.

Timeline: One is a timeline, which helps people understand how quickly the whole process of finding a shelter needed to happen. The timeline also shows why certain people learned certain information at certain times, and how information sharing has sought to be done in an appropriate and orderly way.

Info Doc: The second document presents more information about What, When, Where, Why and Who, etc. This is a lot of information and context about what the shelter is, and what it means for Center Church. Hopefully it will answer some questions, and put some things in context. It is all information that came out of discussions with the city Task Force to find the shelter, or from people who were in charge of the shelter last year. The "In Our Face" section also includes some of the knowledge Evan Harrison has gained throughout his years of working with homeless men who sleep under bridges during his time at Community Meals.

Center Church: where faith is a journey, not a destination

Our Job as a Congregation

Read this letter and the documents. Attend the Question / Answer / Discussion session this Sunday (which will not have any voting), and then attend the special congregation meeting Sunday, November 8th to vote. The wording of the vote is still being worked on, but it will basically be something to the effect of whether or not to allow the city to operate a homeless shelter out of our Church House basement Dec 1 – March 31 this one time.

Read the information. Let it soak in. Try to jot down the questions and solutions you think of, and bring them to the discussion this Sunday. Please come Sunday to the question / answer session at the potluck. Your feelings, opinions and questions are important. If we all work prayerfully in this process, and communicate/participate as a community of faith, then our congregation will be able to thrive for the next months with great peace of mind regardless of how the congregation votes.

Sincerely,
Richard Markham
Acting Clerk

Call to a Special Congregational Meeting

At the request of the Prudential Committee, a special Congregational Meeting has been called for Sunday, November 8, 2009 in the Meeting House after the worship service to act on the following general question (final wording to be determined):

"Shall Center Church enter into an agreement with the City of Hartford to house a No Freeze Shelter on the basement level of Center Church House from approximately December 1, 2009 to March 31, 2010, if a mutually satisfactory contract can be executed?"

Richard Markham,
Acting Clerk

What, When, Where

Center Church has been approached by a city task force (put together by the Mayor's liaison for poverty and homelessness, Lionel Rigler) to find a temporary space to run a winter shelter for homeless men every night for 4 months. This means letting a homeless shelter organization run a homeless shelter in the Church House basement dining room every single night from 7pm – 7am. The shelter group running it would coordinate meal preparation; would pat the men down for drugs, alcohol and weapons; would keep an eye on the men at all times with 2-3 staff present at all times and additional security people during any church activity at night (like Tuesday night meetings, etc). In addition, the shelter must remain open during the daytime if the predicted temperature is 20F or below, OR if there is significant snowfall/precipitation.

Q: So our church would only need to house homeless men if the temperature gets cold at night, right?

A: No, our church would house an expected average of 56 homeless men EACH NIGHT starting December 1 through March 31 if the congregation agrees with the Prudential's recommendation to let the city use our space.

Cost

The City has \$92,000 budgeted in from Hartford's General Budget which is guaranteed for the running of this shelter. Much of it will be for staffing, but there are also line items to cover heat, property upkeep, toilet paper and toiletries, food and utilities. If Center Church agrees to house the shelter, we will rewrite the agreement so that we are paid for our estimates of heating cost, utilities, and a new fridge or freezer for the basement if needed, additional insurance if needed, etc... Center Church basically will not lose any money.

Why

Why the Search

The reason for the search is that Salvation Army building on Washington St. (which housed and ran the shelter for the past 4 years) has had to shut down and sell or stop renting space for 2 of their offices outside Hartford and move them into the Washington St. location in order to stay afloat financially this year. The city had to jump to action, creating this task force in September comprised of representatives from local shelters, several people from the city government who are involved in the Dept. of Health or drafting the shelter contracts and a few of us from Hands On Hartford to help approach local congregations to see if they happen to have any possible space.

Why Need This Shelter

The basic reason for the shelter at all is because there are many men that sleep outside throughout most of the year. They don't come to homeless shelters for an assortment of reasons...some don't want to worry about having any of their stuff stolen, some don't like the atmosphere or the people, some like their independence...etc. They can live under bridges in or in make-shift campsites for three seasons, but will freeze and die from the cold in the winters we face if they don't get real shelter. So when it starts to get REAL cold, there's this additional 50+ people who need shelter and can't be absorbed into the regular shelters that are already full. The process for establishing this winter shelter was sped up years ago when two individuals froze to death under a bridge. Police or ambulances will sometimes drop off homeless people at this shelter to make sure they have a safe, warm place to stay rather than dropping them off at the hospital. This shelter is also a place for people to go who didn't get into the other shelters in the city. The City of Hartford, Salvation Army and the winter shelter staff are quite adamant that they will do whatever they can to make sure no one freezes to death.

Why Center Church

The task force first looked at City Property, but their main location of interest is under mandate by the State to be cleared of all city workers. This not only takes that site out of the running, but these displaced city workers, then, must start to use most of the other city properties.

Then the task force looked at schools that aren't being used this year. These didn't work either because many of them were having some programming in them still, or had a professional week-long day care center across the street that either protested or legally prevented the nearby school to be used. Other churches in the area that potentially had space were heavily using their space and could not give it up.

Center Church stands out from all the other possibilities for several reasons:

- 1) We have a nice big room which is PERFECT for the men to sleep on pads (its slightly larger than last year). Men can enter through the ramp without having to go through the building, the room can easily be watched, and the doorways to each floor can be locked so that the men cannot sneak into the rest of the building. There are nice bathrooms, a large industrial kitchen that is up to code, and an extra fire escape to Lewis Street using the main stairwell.
- 2) We are centrally in downtown, easily accessible by the homeless so that they can easily get to us if they are cold and needing shelter. If the church decides not to hold the shelter here this year, the city's other option(s) may include needing to bus people to the place of the shelter site, and bus them back into town...which could work, but is not as easy on the population served.
- 3) There are no schools or day-care facilities nearby that would cause a legal problem. Lionel Rigler, the leader of the task force, is looking into the law right now to make sure that sex offenders would not be prohibited from staying in the shelter if it was at Center Church since we run church school and nursery care. There would be no more interaction between homeless people and Center Church's families and children than normal typically, because the men would be inside from 7pm – 7am, and would not loiter around the church after 7am...especially on Sundays (the shelter staff would help enforce this). The only time there would be more risk would be if the shelter had to stay open all day. Center Church has several options for this situation. More about this below.
- 4) Center Church leaders / prudential has been one of the few (or only) places approached that has not quickly said "heck no, not in my back yard." The church members must weigh in on this aspect thoughtfully, after trying to digest all the information. We also have neighbors ourselves who could have opinions about the church doing this. Members of Prudential hope to actively strategize and communicate with neighbors to minimize complaints if we house the shelter.

Who

Salvation Army wishes they could continue to house the shelter. They had no problems with damage to the outside of their property. The staff knew how to work with the men. A few fights or incidents would happen occasionally, but a fight or two, someone getting caught using drugs, or someone needing to be sent to the hospital because they had too much to drink are all sorts of incidents that shelters have once in a while (these are incidents I've seen happen at Community Meals once or twice in my time there).

Unfortunately, some of the previous years of statistics on Salvation Army's winter shelter shows high percentages of registered sex offenders. Something to the effect of 2 out of 3, or 3 out of 5 people who stay there are registered sex offenders. The men who run the shelter, who have worked in shelters for 5-9 years understand this and do a good job of getting their clients inside and not letting them out of their sight. Salvation Army had a few activities with children or elderly in their building last year. There were always locked doors between them and the shelter clients. I have heard of no incidents of sexual crimes. Nevertheless, this raises the question of what to do on inclement Sundays when the men must stay downstairs and we typically have Sunday School...or what to do about Valentines day dinners, etc. Lets look into this in the next paragraph.

Mitigating Risk

There are several options for Church School if there are times when the men are downstairs in the basement during a time that church school or another activity is planned.

- 1) One option is to cancel church school on inclement or very cold days. This could be 1 Sunday from December to March 31, or it could be an unlucky handful of Sundays. The pros of this is that it erases the risk of interaction between the clients and Center Church families/children. Everyone just goes to worship at the Meeting House and there can be nursery downstairs in the meeting house. But it does reduce CE Programming, which is a disappointment and a pain.
- 2) Another idea is that on some of these days, such inclement weather would force the church to cancel worship, Sunday School or Potlucks anyway. This is probably true for the most snowy days, but hasn't always been true. But otherwise, it simply isn't the case that we cancel potlucks if its 20F...people come anyway and we eat with however many people came. So again, mitigating risk comes up against some of our traditional programming.
- 3) A third solution is to not rule out having potlucks, church school or other things on inclement days. We might be able to install a lockable barrier (kind of like the ones outside some of our outside doors) that would prevent people from accessing the main floor of the church house from the basement. It could be done in such a way that it doesn't block the fire exit out to Lewis Street, but would be more on level with the first floor stairs, to block off the way down from the first floor. Also, we would let the shelter staff know about these days, and our intention to possibly have activities so that more security is hired on inclement days. We can put that person in the stairwell, they would also have a person watch the elevator to ensure no one would use that. Finally, we would be sure to follow our safe church policy and have 2 teachers

per class and not let any children wander around without being escorted. These precautions (and possible others we want to add into the shelter agreement) could mitigate risk and fear to where many staff, families and church members feel comfortable. The advantage of this is that we would not have to sacrifice any programming. If we put these safety measures in place for this #3 idea, we would have the OPTION of having everyone simply go to worship, or deciding to have church school / potlucks...etc. If we decided to have the option of having potlucks on inclement or cold days, church members needing wheelchair or elevator assistance for potlucks (which would be on our 2nd floor) would be escorted to the elevator by the trained shelter staff. The men at the shelter would clear a path and let the needed people through.

One of the most difficult aspects of the shelter using Center Church would be these "inclement" days that the shelter is forced to stay open so that men do not freeze. If this happens on a Sunday, the congregation would have important decisions to make. We as a congregation, as parents and as families need to think about this, and share your opinions and ideas about what to do on Sundays that the shelter is forced to stay open.

In Our Face

One of the final things to talk about in this informational guide is the fact that these homeless people are not total strangers to us. Our congregation has been serving some of them in our coffee ministry, or when our team goes to Community Meals. Some of these people sit on the bench during the day, or in Bushnell Park. They are not all sex offenders. They are real people, with a sense of humor, with names, with personalities. The winter shelter staff told some of us at a meeting that for the most part they just want to come in, play cards, watch tv, eat, sleep and leave without causing any trouble at all. They have daily routines, places to get food, places to stay warm and really only come to the winter shelter simply because they would otherwise freeze.

But even though we have encountered some of these people in places like our coffee ministry, Community Meals or the street corner, the decision to shelter them puts them much more **in our face**. We may not have realized this much about some of the homeless in Hartford before, but taking this next step forces us to learn more about them. We learn how vulnerable they are, we learn that some of them have committed crimes in the past, we learn what part of our broader community goes through, looks like, smells like. If they have access to deodorant, socks and showers, they actually can look and smell fine. They take pride in their appearance to the same degree as individual. Some rich people don't treat themselves well, others trim their beard every day – the same is true for the poor, if they have access to the clothes, toiletries, etc. I know a homeless guy who does not take care of himself, I know others that do. We won't be able to tell everyone who is homeless, but our church staff would get to see them every day. Any way you look at it, the decision to let them use our space puts them more "in our face." There are huge advantages to this, there are risks about this which force us to create solutions and change some of our practices, there are fears we may have, there are spiritual and faith questions and convictions that come up. It is your job as the congregation to let some of this soak in, and to do your best to share questions and comments at the Question and Answer session this Sunday so that we can respond as a community.

Winter Shelter Timeline – compiled by Evan Harrison

- Before 2005** Hartford Shelters start to see numbers outstretching capacity during winter and city starts looking into the creation of a winter shelter open nightly for several months. 2 people freeze under a bridge in Hartford. City redoubles its efforts to create additional winter shelter.
- By 2005** Salvation Army's Washington Street, Hartford location houses and runs this new winter shelter.
- September '09** State budget has just been passed, Salvation Army realizes that it will have to relocate two of its non-Hartford locations to their Washington St. location in Hartford. This leaves Salvation Army without space to house the winter shelter for men. Regretfully, they hurry to tell the city about this problem.
- September '09** The mayor tells Lionel Riggler (his liason for poverty and homelessness issues) to assemble a task force to find a new space for the shelter immediately. Lionel assembles several folks from the city government (Dept. of Health and Human Services; people who drew up contracts with Salvation Army for the winter shelter, etc...) as well as representatives from all the homeless shelters in Hartford to start exploring every possible site as fast as possible.
- Lionel calls Tom Bright from Hands On Hartford and explains the situation and asks for him to think of any congregations he has contacts with who might have an appropriate space and might consider letting it be used as a shelter. Tom and Lionel think of five-seven churches in the area.
- Lionel and maybe another person or two from the City check out city-owned properties, but the one place that looked good had unfortunately been mandated by the state to be vacated of city personnel. Not only was that a dead end, but the displaced city personnel were being placed across other potential city sites, taking them out of the running too.
- Next, vacant schools were considered. But as Lionel went to visit them, most of them had small programs that were using the building, or full-time daycare facilities across the street, which prevented them from being able to be used due to the fact that some shelter clients are sex-offenders.
- October '09** Evan Harrison (our Warburton) attends one of the Shelter Task Force meetings with Lionel and shelter representatives in place of Tom Bright, who was out that day. Evan hears about the whole situation and agrees to help Tom approach congregations. Evan, Tom and Lionel have several ideas for congregations to approach, and start speaking to them while the city and shelters explore any other possible site options.
- As Lionel goes to other congregations, he finds that they have already booked up their space, and would not be able to give it up for shelter use.
- Oct. 6th** Evan mentions the idea to Paul Goodman, asking if Lionel could just look at the space to see if it was even satisfactory. If it gets shot down by Lionel, then there's really no discussion. Paul wonders if the basement is even heated, but suggests I talk to the stewards about whether the space would meet the minimum requirements.
- Oct 8th** Evan asks staff if the basement is heated, and it seems that it is not heated. Evan emails Lionel that the space will probably not even work because it is not heated.
- Oct 12th** Evan emails Stewards, telling them about the need to find a winter shelter, and asking if dining room would meet the requirements...to know if it was even a possibility. Evan mentions not being sure whether the room is even heated.
- Oct 13th** Evan hears back from Leslie Thompson from Stewards saying that they'll discuss it. She's not sure if its heated, but they'll find out. She says that the Stewards are happy to investigate the "will the space fit the requirement" issue, but that Outreach might be the more appropriate committee to ask whether the church is interested from an outreach standpoint.
- Just before Stewards meeting, Evan, Jim Macomber and David Maclean go down to basement. Jim and David assure Evan that yes, the basement dining room has always been heated. They point to the radiators near the ceiling and say the only reason it is ever cold down there is because the heat hasn't been turned on long enough to really saturate the room.
- The Outreach committee hears about the shelter from Evan, and how other than giving up use of the space, an issue would be what to do on the days that the men need to stay inside on a Sunday, since we would have church school and possibly potlucks, and people needing to use the elevator, etc. Outreach agrees in the idea of using our space to shelter men in principle, but says more details must be hammered out and that the matter should be taken up by Prudential.

Leslie tells Evan that the Stewards certify that the space definitely falls within the requirements of square footage, kitchen and bathroom facilities that the city was looking for. Jim Macomber agrees to call Lionel and set up a site visit to see if Lionel and the city would rule out the church for any reason.

Oct. 14 Evan lets Lionel know that Center Church is an option, once more. Several other congregations have been ruled out by now. Lionel says he looks forward to seeing the building and will continue to ask local homeless shelters to step up to the plate to "run" the operation. Even though most of the on-site staff from Salvation Army are interested and available to staff the winter shelter, the city still needs a major organization to agree to overseeing and coordinating the whole process of running the shelter. Salvation Army, although they have many of the workers to run the shelter, may not be able to staff the upper levels of management this year.

Evan lets Paul know how the two committee meetings went, and Paul says he needs to talk with Pat and some of the staff to see what they think, in case Center Church really remains a possibility.

Oct 22-24 Some time this week Evan speaks with Lionel and ask if he made it over to Center Church to take a look. He said that yes, he and Jim Macomber looked at the facility and that it looked very good.

Evan tells Lionel that there really needs to be a meeting between Lionel, other city workers involved in this decision to get together with Center Church staff and representatives from Stewards and Outreach to really get into some of the details and ask questions. Lionel says that sounds great and that he will make sure someone from Salvation Army is there who can answer questions about how it ran last year. This meeting is set for Tuesday, Oct. 27th because Lionel is out of town at a required training the rest of the week.

Evan emails Paul, Pat, Jason, Jim from Stewards and Reg from Outreach about this meeting and they are all free.

Oct. 27th 11 AM, folks gather for this meeting. There's Lionel, a guy from the Department of Health, Miguel (who helps write up the contract), maybe another government guy, three guys who physically ran the shelter on a nightly basis for the past 5 years and who have worked at additional shelters for the past 9 years, the leader of Salvation Army on Washington St., and us Center Church folks. The shelter managers love the facility and already start brainstorming about security. It will be simple with the one room. Dinner will be easy by running them through the serving room. No one will be allowed in the kitchen unless they're authorized cook staff/workers. They talk about how they run it and it impresses everyone...me, Center Church staff and the city folks. Tuesday meetings won't be a problem, and if we do decide to do an event at night or on inclement Sunday morning, the shelter staff can be redoubled to ensure everything goes smoothly. Nevertheless, Miguel wants to make sure we understand that there lots of registered sex offenders among the winter shelter population, and that the easiest thing to do would be to not use people in that building on Sundays when the men stay inside.

Prudential meets at 7:15 pm. Lionel and Miguel are there from the city to help give information. Evan comes in about 7:30 to sit in. After hearing all these details (most of which are in the timeline or the other attached document), Bill WP asks if there's a motion...if folks want to vote and decide on it as Prudential (yes or no), or whether we want to take it to the congregation even though we only have a week and a half to decide. Though several people felt comfortable enough to decide on the issue, everyone agreed in the end that the best thing to do would be to go through this as a congregation. They wanted to let the congregation know the information, give them a chance to ask questions this coming Sunday (without any vote that day), and then have a full week to vote Sunday, November 8th. It would be pushing it to the very edge, responding to the City at the last minute, and it would really increase the congregation's responsibility...but it was felt that this is such a big issue that affects the whole congregation, they should have a chance not only to talk and raise questions, but to vote on what they feel Center Church is called to do in this situation.