

Special report on Evanston's homeless

Church opens temporary basement shelter

By BOB SEIDENBERG

Religious leaders are proceeding with plans to provide temporary shelter for the homeless — whether the city goes along with the idea or not.

As city officials looked on at an extraordinary community worship service at First Baptist Church Oct. 31, the church's minister, Rev. Robert V. Thompson, representing the Center for Public Ministry, announced that beginning that night "all night prayer vigils" would be held in the basement of First Baptist, 607 Lake St., with the homeless invited into the building.

That action signaled a move by Thompson and other members of the religious community toward taking matters into their own hands and away from attempts to seek support of a shelter plan from city officials. The Evanston Ecumenical Action Council, had appeared before city officials on four separate occasions requesting funds to establish a temporary facility. Each time, their request was rejected.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS decided to move on the issue themselves, Thompson said, hoping the city would follow. Since the Oct. 31 announcement, Thompson has said the number of homeless attending the sessions at the all-night prayer vigils had increased from four the first night to a dozen by Monday. The increase has established that there is a need for a shelter, Thompson said, adding, "Now it's time for the city to act."

The Oct. 31 worship session drew more than 200 persons. Pat Fahey, executive director of the Evanston Ecumenical Action Council, brought those present up to date on the situation.

"Friends, the Evanston Ecumenical Action Council has approached our elected officials and asked them to assume responsibility for the homeless in our community.

"Some of our elected officials don't believe that homelessness is a pressing problem in Evanston.

"We are told that shelter cannot be provided without some zoning changes that will require at least six months. We must encourage them to act now."

Thompson, reading from a prepared statement as religious leaders and congregants circled around him in the old city courtroom, said "The plight of the homeless in Evanston is alarming to the sensibilities of the religious community of Evanston.

"TO OUR ELECTED officials in the city of Evanston we say: 'We appeal to you by the mercies of God' to recognize the growing reality of homelessness in Evanston. We appeal to you to assume responsibility for this problem, by opening the unused courtroom or some other suitable public facility for shelter.

"We request that our mayor and city council appropriate funding for staffing and costs for such a center."

Speaker after speaker at the worship service stressed the community's obligation to house the homeless.

Rabbi Peter Knoble of Beth Emet Free Synagogue said the obligation to take care of the homeless is a cornerstone of Jewish tradition, quoting Scripture:

"You shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Israel."



Evanston church leaders walk along Lake St. (top picture), to the courtroom last week to protest the lack of city involvement in providing shelter for the homeless. The Rev. Robert Thompson, of First Baptist Church (bottom picture), addressed the gathering at the courtroom, citing the problems of the homeless. (Staff photos by Jim Robinson)

Knoble continued, "The homeless are strangers and needy in our society. We are commanded to love them and help them, that is our responsibility."

Sister Victoria Garvey of Seabury Western Theological Seminary, harkened back to Mary and Joseph, calling them homeless. Although they found shelter, she noted, "Is there any good news for the homeless today? I think so. This (the worship service) is one indication of the good news."

THE REV. JAMES E. Neuman, pastor of Hemenway United Methodist Church, led the audience in a litany of confession. "Hear our confession, O God; turn our guilt into responsibility. Transform our apathy into love; our idleness into action."

But it was Thompson, the young minister at First Baptist, who aroused the worshippers in a fiery speech, "Saying What We Mean, Meaning What We Say." Announcing the plan of all night prayer vigils, Thompson said, "I have some good news and that is as of tonight homeless people in Evanston won't sleep in the streets.

"The center for Public Ministry has temporarily and as an emergency measure will begin a series of all night prayer vigils.

"We will exercise our right and we will invite the homeless into worship with us. We have a program, a prayer room for men and a prayer room for women. We need your help. We need help from our congregations and syna-

gogues. We have only begun to fight."

Following Thompson's speech, religious leaders and congregants, candles in hand, filed out of the church, some carrying banners, and walked down Lake St. and to the courtroom, where Mayor Jay Lytle, City Mgr. Joel Asprooth and just named health and human services director Helen McCarthy stood at the rear. Upon entering the courtroom, Thompson said he greeted Lytle and told him he was glad he had come. But he said he never learned why the mayor was present. "He just said, Hi, and that's all he said." The homeless issue is expected to be debated by city officials at Monday night's meeting of the council's human services committee at the Evanston Civic Center, 2100 N. Ridge Av.