

When Christian Expansion Threatens Government Agencies

Since 1924, City Gospel Mission has been providing food, shelter and hope for Cincinnati's homeless population. But the Christian ministry's mission to house homeless men may be jeopardized because of federal regulations banning religious and gender discrimination.

The City Gospel Mission's plan to move to a new state-of-the-art building has been put in limbo after the group discovered the property has fair housing restrictions.

Plans to develop the new facility were well under way when an insurance company discovered that the property had a private use restriction dating back some 40 years. That deed restriction was part of a partnership between the city and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Cincinnati officials agreed to waive the deed restriction, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* reports. But so far, HUD has not.

Roger Howell, the president of the mission, told me the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development had concerns over the ministry's religious work as well as its male-only housing stipulation.

"They are concerned we are violating the Fair Housing Act," Howell told me.

According to HUD's website, "Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (Fair Housing Act), as amended, prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (including children under the age of 18 living with parents or legal custodians, pregnant women, and people securing custody

of children under the age of 18), and disability.”

A HUD spokesman told me they are investigating the matter and would not be able to comment. The spokesman denied religion had anything to do with the controversy. But officials with the City Gospel Mission, the Cincinnati mayor’s office and the offices of U.S. Sens. Rob Portman and Sherrod Brown say religion indeed has something to do with the controversy.

“We are a faith-based Christian organization,” Howell says. “That is crucial to all of our programs. All of our staff adhere to those beliefs and live it. That’s important.”

For more than a month, the mission has been trying to get clarification from HUD on whether it can continue its ministry at the new location. But so far, HUD has not responded to its requests. So right now, the ministry is in a state of flux.

“We are an organization that wants to have integrity and not be in violation of any laws,” Howell says.

But he fears that the federal agency may be losing sight of the bigger picture.

“We are trying to help homeless folks get out of homelessness and become productive members of society,” Howell says. “Worrying about the Fair Housing Act at a homeless shelter loses sight of the big picture.”

The City Gospel Mission has bipartisan support in its battle against HUD. Both of Ohio’s U.S. senators sent a joint letter to HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan asking for a speedy resolution.

“Faith-based organizations across Ohio like Cincinnati’s City Gospel Mission play a crucial role in helping struggling families get back on their feet,” Sen. Portman told me during an interview at Fox News. “I’m concerned by any regulations or interpretation of regulations that push Ohioans back onto the streets, instead of giving them the help they need.”

Portman told me he's hoping HUD can give the Christian ministry a bit of leeway. But so far, HUD hasn't responded to the senator's letter either.

"It's a fact that HUD has been so unwilling to show any kind of flexibility," Portman says. "It's a typical bureaucratic response in my view."

Portman agrees with my observation that it sounds like the Obama administration is taking another hard-line position against religious liberty.

"They are overlooking the mission of this group and looking too much at the religious aspects," he says. "They just need to show a little more flexibility, which is what federal bureaucracies are not good at."

Howell says when push comes to shove, the mission will not violate its religious beliefs—even if it means losing its new home.

"If we can't go to this new site, we can't go to this new site," he says. "There's no question from our point of view that we will continue to operate our program in a way that is consistent with what we believe the Bible says—and will live within the law."

The facts are pretty clear in this case. The City Gospel Mission needs to move to a larger facility so it can house more homeless men. And yet the Obama administration is trying to use the Fair Housing Act to put those men back on the streets. That doesn't seem very fair to me.

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