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Giving shelter

Pastor, church take up ministry to provide housing for the homeless

By Chad Berry Staff Writer

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When the Rev. Larry Doughty found a young man sleeping in an abandoned house on Thursday, he played the role of Good Samaritan.

With nighttime temperatures dipping into the 20s and 30s, Doughty couldn't leave without offering help.

"How do you survive? How do you sleep?" Doughty asked. "I said, 'Come on, we're going to put you in a/splace.' "

That place was the Jesus Way Homeless Shelter on the 2600 block of 24th Street. The shelter, which opened more than four years ago, consists of six separate houses that were donated to Doughty. Each house has a living room, kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. The shelter is an outreach ministry of the Church of Movement Toward Freedom.

Doughty, 46, is the pastor of the church and a lifelong Tuscaloosa resident. He said he was called by God to start the shelter and help the "homeless, the naked and the hungry."

"For one thing, in Tuscaloosa, there are a growing number of people who are homeless," said Doughty's wife, Patricia. "The majority of them are mentally ill or [have problems that are] drug-related. Until they get on their feet and get employment, they won't ever qualify for the housing."

Tuscaloosa city councilman Harrison Taylor said that homelessness in the area is a bigger problem than most residents realize.

"I know the only time it really comes to the average citizen's mind is on a really cold night," Taylor said. "Other than that, we as a whole just shut them out until



Staff Photos | Michael E. Palmer

Pastor Larry Doughty started the Jesus Way homeless shelter after six abandoned houses were donated to his ministry.

some tragedy or cold night."

But not at Jesus Way.

More than 30 families and 100 people have been housed at the shelter this year at no charge to them. The average length of stay is three months. Free food, blankets, clothing are provided to the shelters' residents. The shelter is funded by donations from church members and people in the community. It also receives financial aid from Community Service Programs in Tuscaloosa and a \$2,000/annual grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"When God gave us a vision, I was called crazy, because I didn't charge them rent," Larry Doughty said. "They asked me how I was going to make it doing it like that and I said, 'God will make a way.'"

The Jesus Way shelter may receive resident referrals from different governmental agencies, as well as fellow humanitarian organizations like the Salvation Army, which has room for 24 men, five women and eight families at its shelters. The Salvation Army allows shelter residents to stay three nights for free. After that, they must pay \$7 unless they can show proof they are applying for jobs.

Similar steps are taken at Jesus Way, although there is no time limit on a person's stay, and there is no charge. When people come to the shelter for help, they must fill out a profile, have their picture taken and develop an individual family service plan showing the steps and goals they will follow in order to overcome their needs. Doughty and the shelter's other workers then help the residents find work and start a savings account.

"It's not a thing where you're going to stay there and feel sorry for yourself or just for a handout," Taylor said. "They want you to move from A to B to C and on up and be a productive citizen in Tuscaloosa."

Success stories

Over the past four years, the Jesus Way shelter has helped several families and individuals find their way to financial freedom.

The Doughtys received a Christmas card last month from a family who had been helped, and former residents occasionally stop by to express their thanks.

Tracy Moton, 40, came to the shelter seven months ago after a problem with his landlord. And \$1,300 worth of fines and tickets left him with no place to go.

"I decided to do right and get my life together," Moton said. "Ever since then, everything has been coming together. You got to be willing to change and ready for a change. Other than that, it's not going to work."

Since he arrived, Moton, who has two teenage sons, has paid off his debts, had his driver's license reinstated and got his children's Medicaid started.

He is now able to pay rent, and is drawing unemployment. He hopes to start his own flooring business soon, and credits Jesus Way for his turnaround.

"Just through this, it gives [homeless people] a better chance, another chance at living and not being homeless," Moton said.

Sharon Smith, 47, has been at the shelter for almost a year. She came to the shelter when she was out of work and had medical expenses she was struggling to pay.

"It's really good," Smith said. "It's a good environment and it sure helps when you need somewhere to stay."

Drugs and alcohol are not allowed at the shelter. Doughty hopes the shelter can be a safe haven from some of the temptations the residents face.

"We are not here to make you sorry, and we're not here to make it hard for you," he said.

Pitching In

Another part of the success of the Jesus Way Homeless Shelter is its community-wide support. Several churches have helped at the shelter, including First United Methodist and Forest Lake United Methodist.

The shelter has also received help from Habitat for Humanity, a church from Texas and local agencies.

During the holidays, the Shaun Alexander Foundation donated a truckload of toys, clothing and other gifts.

"This is what it's about," Doughty said. "If we can come together in the right spirit, with the right motives, we can help some people."

David Perkins, church administrator at Forest Lake United Methodist, takes his Sunday school class to the shelter on the weekends. Class members were looking for a place to do some local service work, and the shelter was the perfect fit.

"Once we got over here, we fell in love with it, because it is meeting needs," Perkins said. "It's something that gets your heart once you start working and meet the people. You see these people are just like you and that, for whatever reason, you have the opportunity to serve them."

A growing ministry

Doughty isn't content with the shelter's status. He is in the process of transforming a building next to the shelter into a community library and activity center.

He hopes to fill it with computers and books to help the shelter and neighborhood's residents, as well as using it as a place to counsel.

Plans are also in the works for a separate men's shelter a few blocks over, behind Union Furniture on 21st Street. Doughty said the shelter would be open to men age 18 and older, a demographic that he says is often forgotten when homelessness is discussed.

"We have so many men, black and white, sleeping under bridges," Doughty said.

He isn't sure how the library will be renovated and the extra shelter built. But that doesn't concern him. He said he trusts God to make a way.

"By faith, now," he said. "By faith."

Reach Chad Berry at chad.berry@tuscaloosanews.com or 722-0222.
