

WHEN REACHING OUT HITS A WALL

Follow this church as their efforts to obey Christ's call pits them against City Hall

BY MARDI DOLFO-SMITH

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Historically and theologically the role of the Church is to reach out to the less fortunate and disadvantaged. Heeding Jesus' own words, we attempt to provide a cup of water in his name, showing the care and compassion of Christ.

But today's society, governments, and regulatory bodies are more and more defining how, when and where organizations—including churches—can and cannot act. It sets up conflict between societal understandings of the historic and continuing role of churches and the role of authorities.

When those conflicts do occur, there is an increased media scrutiny of the situation as well as of the church. In Vancouver, our church found out just how true that is.

Tenth Avenue Alliance is a church reaching out and helping in its community. It has run two outreach programs: Oasis, a drop-in lunch program for the under-employed for the last 10 years and Out of the Cold (OOTC) a dinner/sleepover in the church gym for the last four years. Out of the Cold and Oasis seek to serve Jesus, caring for 'the



least' in our community by providing healthy meals and shelter. OOTC and Oasis staff and volunteers care for guests practically, spiritually and emotionally, offering respect to those guests as well as a place of welcome and community. Staff and volunteers refer guests to other community resources such as counselling, housing, drug and alcohol rehab.

These ministries have brought life to our church, have increased the diversity of our worshipping community (as many guests end up becoming part of our Sunday services and other programs) and

are the only ministries in our church with a waiting list for volunteers!

In 2005, we applied for a development permit in order to build an addition to our existing building. During this process, the Planning Department of the City of Vancouver became aware of Oasis and OOTC. They decided these programs were outside of the scope of the church land use permission and required us to seek an additional permit to use our property for social service.

We did not agree with the assessment that feeding and sheltering the poor

was something separate from our other ministries. For us, caring for the needy is within the historic practices of 'church usage' both locally and worldwide. Reluctantly, however, we applied for the social services permit and the planning department began to process it.

In the spring of 2006, due to construction issues, the entrance for program guests changed from the alley behind the church to the front entrance on Tenth Avenue. This sparked a negative response from several neighbours who felt threatened by the presence of



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our guests. The issue exploded as a few concerned neighbours spearheaded a campaign against the church and its programs.

They posted and distributed leaflets about us, contacted the media, and complained to City Hall. Two fiery neighbourhood meetings were held followed by a development permit board meeting. Although a handful (50 or so) of our neighbours was against the church's outreach ministry, many others came out to support us and some even volunteered to help at the programs.

Despite the opposition from some neighbours, a conditional permit for the programs was granted. The conditions included developing a management plan in consultation with the neighbourhood, the exterior monitoring of the block for potential problems, and some minor building upgrades. The process of getting the permit was slow and painful with many consultations with the City and neighbours. And we, at Tenth, continued to have concerns about the precedent that was being set by us even applying for the permit.

In the spring of 2007 a diverse group of faith communities, including conservative and liberal protestants, Roman Catholics, Jewish groups, Muslims and Sikhs joined together to call the city government to stop the practice of requiring faith communities to seek social service permits to care for the poor.

As this issue and the faith community protests hit the media, our church received national TV, radio and newspaper coverage. It

was an amazing experience that helped us understand and purify our motivations for doing this ministry. At the staff and elder level we constantly reassessed our call to care for our neighbours in need to make sure we were doing the 'right' things for the 'right' reasons.

In July, after three years of arguing with the City of Vancouver, city counsellors unanimously agreed that churches do not need social service permits to serve the poor and we were released from the need to continue the application process.

Even though this was a tough process for us that took many staff and volunteer hours, it served to unite our church in our call to care 'for the least'. It enabled our church to become known in our city as a community that puts our faith into action and inspired us, as a church, to believe that God can use our community to impact our city and beyond.

It is our hope in the future to continue to listen to God's call for us to care for the least. Plans are already in the works to take on new issues, including addressing the vulnerability of prostituted and trafficked women and children.

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See Mardi Dolfo-Smith tell the Tenth Avenue story as part of the General Assembly President's Report. An edited video of the President's Report is included in the Fall 2008 edition of Family Snapshots



Desert Sand: So Little, So Much

1. Help to break the cycle of AIDS by assisting orphans and single parents.
2. Provide resources for a library which will serve university students.
3. Increase care by helping to replace physiotherapy equipment, improve access for wheelchairs, and provide medications.
4. Help in the development of an elementary school with a focus on values education.
5. Provide equipment for a youth centre.

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