

Sheltering the Homeless

A tip from Jacksonville Grace UMC (LaMoine River District)

The community of Jacksonville, Illinois, has wrestled for years with what to do about the people in the community who find themselves homeless. Unlike many larger communities, Jacksonville (population just under 20,000) does not have a homeless shelter. The Salvation Army, HELPS Ministry, and other local churches and community organizations do an admirable job of helping people with the resources they receive, but Jacksonville still had people sleeping in their car or in local parks. In the winter months in particular, these arrangements are woefully inadequate.

In early 2011, Grace UMC in Jacksonville offered one wing of its building to New Directions, a local non-profit group, to open a “warming center.” The center opened in February, and has been open from 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. every night since.

Grace UMC provides three ground-level rooms dedicated solely for use by the center. The groups which used to occupy the spaces (two Sunday school classes and the choir) have moved to other areas of the building. The church also provides access to their basement shower facilities, and they have installed washer and dryer hook-ups so a donated washer and dryer may be used by guests and volunteers.

New Directions provides a director for the center, under the supervision of a volunteer board. They also recruit and train volunteers to staff the center. Volunteers sign up to serve 6-hour shifts (from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. and from 1 a.m. to 7 a.m.). Community members donate necessary supplies. The Jacksonville Police Department provides background checks for all guests of the center for everyone’s safety and security.

The warming center (or cooling center during the summer months) is open to men, women, and families. Separate rooms for men and for women and children include cots for those who wish to rest while at the center. A common room is also available, offering space for individuals and families to gather and eat snacks, watch movies, play board games, or just visit. Restroom facilities are available just off of the common room.

Perhaps Jacksonville will one day have a true homeless shelter. Meanwhile, there is now a place to go for those who fall through the cracks: those who just need somewhere to stay until that first paycheck on the new job, those whose welcome elsewhere comes to an end, those who find themselves in Jacksonville away from family and facing financial struggles.

Opening the center has provided a new way for Grace UMC to connect with the surrounding community and to use its building as the ministry tool it is. But one of the most exciting effects of this ministry effort is that some of the guests of the center also join the congregation for worship, providing a glimpse of God’s kingdom, where all are welcome.