

# Brattleboro Reformer

Serving Windham County, Vermont and Southwestern New Hampshire

248 USPS 063-400

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1985 BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT



George Chappell

WALTER WHITE leaves the Municipal Center after meeting with town officials over his shelter for the homeless.

## Church shelter gets a reprieve

By GEORGE CHAPPELL

A local church's shelter for the homeless will be allowed to stay open while it appeals the town's decision to close it for violating zoning ordinances.

Without the appeal, the church would have had to close its shelter by Christmas Day.

Walter "Wally" W. White, minister of Faith Ministries Evangelistic Association, said Friday he intended to file an appeal with the Brattleboro Zoning Board of Adjustment to contest its decision to close his church and shelter at 3 Frost Place. He also said that if all appeals failed he would refuse to turn the homeless men staying at his shelter out onto the streets.

"I'm telling you what Jesus Christ first told me to do; I'm telling you who I serve," White said heatedly at a meeting with town officials in the Municipal Center on Friday.

Earlier in the year, after holding one hearing and visiting the mission, the ZBA voted on Nov. 25 to deny the mission the status of a church, calling it a shelter, not a church. Faith Ministries was given 30 days until Dec. 25 to file an appeal or close the shelter.

### Considering an appeal

In response to the ZBA's decision, White and Peter Diamondstone, who is advising White in his dispute with the town, met with Brattleboro Town Attorney Robert Pu and zoning administrator Christine Hart at the town hall Friday to discuss the mission's closing.

White showed up Friday prepared with an appeal, but held off submitting it until he talked with town officials.

"... We shared information," Diamondstone said of the meeting with Pu and Hart.

"Until they've held another hearing to reconsider the weight of the evidence, there won't be any enforcement proceedings. The town's policy is to hold off whenever there's an appeal," Diamondstone said, adding that Pu agreed with him about the town's policy.

White plans to file his appeal Monday.

How has this controversy come about? For the past three years, White and his wife, Emily, have operated their church and shelter, first in their home and then, as the membership grew, in their garage across the street from their house on Frost Place. Six men is the most the Whites house in their shelter at one time.

### Encounter with the town

The trouble with the town came when the Whites earlier this year applied for a permit to upgrade the shelter. Up until then the Whites had not applied for a permit for the shelter.

Some supporters of the Whites' ministry think the ZBA would have approved the application if it had been only for the church and did not include the shelter. The ZBA's report rejected the application because the mission was a shelter providing counseling to the homeless: "as such, it does not fit the definition of Religious Institution, and is therefore not permitted in a Multiple Residential District."

The federal and state governments have recognized Faith Ministries as a church, granting it tax-exempt status.

Besides sheltering the homeless, as part of their ministry the Whites serve free suppers on Thursdays. They also hold prayer meetings after the Thursday night suppers

See SHELTER, Page 14

## Shelter

■ Continued from PAGE 1 and on Sundays.

White said that although he was not an ordained minister, he was a minister nevertheless, a right he said was granted him by the First Amendment.

Their religion is central to their lives, White said. And he and his wife would have opened the shelter and counseling center with or without the presence of a religious organization, he said. "The desire to create a haven for people comes from the law of love," he said.

### Reason for their actions

Mrs. White explained further that love was the underlying motive for their actions.

"Love is action; if you love somebody, you'll do something to help them," she said.

White described the history of the Faith Ministries church shelter. "At first we opened our house by having prayer meetings at home rather than the garage.

"Different people would come to prayer meeting and word got around. Once in a while some people were desperate for a place to stay," he added.

The Whites also offer drug and alcohol abuse counseling. Alcoholics, who are usually turned away if they are drunk when they apply to other shelters, are taken in by the Whites, drunk or sober.

"But, they're not allowed to drink here," Mrs. White said.

White added: "I knew what to say to them because I was a drunk. I believe I have a deeper understanding of alcohol and drug problems because of that."

White said he drank heavily until he was 38 years old, when he stopped and sought treatment; now he is 55.

### Help from donations

The couple also offer job counseling and help people find jobs. All of this they do with the help of a few donations, according to White, who holds a full-time job at the Brattleboro Retreat.

Their knowledge of counseling and even their counseling language, according to Mrs. White, comes from the Scriptures. The language of the Scriptures becomes a vehicle for their counseling. "I've been a total student of the Scriptures," she said.

White said that if his appeal failed, he would not turn the men out into the street.

"This is a religious institution. I applied for a religious association through the secretary of state's office. And we have a tax exemption from the federal government. We are a church," he said.

The Whites both stress that one does not have to be a Christian or even a religious person to seek help at Faith Ministries. Their shelter, their Thursday night suppers and their counseling are open to anyone wanting help.

Some members of local churches have reached for their wallets in their support of the Whites. The Rev. Jack Bixby of Centre Congregational Church said his church as a whole did not support the Whites, but that individuals within the church did.

### Support for the Whites

"We think Wally's doing a fine, sincere thing for the street people. We don't believe they're dangerous," Bixby said of comments previously made against some residents at the Faith Ministries church shelter.

"But, our church is not supporting him; there are some people in it who are, especially the Department of Missions and Services. We've given him tentative financial support for the in-

stallation of a toilet at the shelter, if it comes to that," Bixby added.

At present, the Faith Ministries church shelter has a chemical toilet.

The Whites also have support from other charitable institutions in town.

"The members of Brigid's Kitchen are behind Wally. Anything is better than being outside in the cold in the freezing weather," said Sister Theresa of the pastoral ministry at St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church, and coordinator of Brigid's Kitchen, an emergency food shelter on Walnut Street.

Brigid's Kitchen serves free meals on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays, from 11:45 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. Fifteen to 30 people eat at that time, and usually there are more near the end of the month when their money runs out, she said.

### Meals on six days

"Loaves and Fishes at the Centre Congregational Church serves meals on Tuesdays and Fridays, and Wally serves on Thursdays. The same crowd goes to all three places," Sister Theresa added. It means that one can have at least one meal a day six days a week in Brattleboro, she said.

"Some of the people have tiny babies. Some are doing all they can to support them, but their checks go to pay the rent with very little left over for food.

"But most of the members think Wally's doing a wonderful thing. We admire him for reaching out to those people who are homeless," Sister Theresa said.

Another shelter in Brattleboro, Morningside Emergency Shelter, located on Morningside Road, often refers people to Faith Ministries. A United Way supported shelter, Morningside has room for 12 adults and five children, according to Betty J. Platt, executive director.

"In October and November we had to turn away 110 people," Platt said. "There's a real need in Brattleboro for the Whites' shelter; we need people like that."

At the Faith Ministries church shelter, on a Thursday evening or on a Sunday morning, homeless men and church members sing hymns, often accompanied by one of the shelter's residents playing the piano.

During a recent hymn-singing session, the Whites talked about their hopes for the shelter.

"The churches are getting behind the idea of a shelter. Sometimes I don't care as long as the shelter gets built. At least they would be working together," White said.

Said Mrs. White: "God allowed this to happen, to make the community aware. These old men are like Mary and Joseph. If a stable is enough for God, why can't we have a heated garage for the homeless?"