

Letter of Correction re. “United We Stand” Tent Encampment

On Saturday, December 5, a community meeting was held concerning the status of “United We Stand,” a small tent encampment which our congregation hosted from August to mid-November of this year. At that meeting, an “Information Sheet” was distributed to the attendees by Bill and Kim Lancaster, the current hosts of UWS – a copy of this sheet was given to me on December 6.

After reading this sheet, I wanted to correct some inaccurate information from it concerning UWS’s time at Bethel.

In mid-June of this year I was contacted by representatives of the UWS encampment requesting that our congregation consider hosting them when they were no longer able to stay with their then-current hosts in Richmond Beach. Apparently, the camp had failed to locate a new home within their 90 day permit for that site and was desperate for a new place to stay so that they wouldn’t have to disband. After a great deal of internal discernment, our congregation agreed to apply to host the encampment – with the stipulation that, given our ongoing process of selling our current site, we would be unable to extend their time with us beyond the basic 90 day permit. This was agreed to by UWS leadership as well as their sponsoring organization (Greater Seattle Cares) with a specific emphasis placed on the “emergency” nature of the request. The dates for their stay were determined as August through October of 2015 (as their then-current host had applied for an extension through July).

Within the first week of their arrival, one of the elected leaders of the camp (or “ECs”) approached me about applying for an extension to their stay with us. I reminded him that this was not possible: hosting the camp at all was making our sales process trickier, and we were only able to offer the initial 90 day stay due to their emergency need for a site. Throughout their stay – and over multiple changes in EC leadership – I continued to remind the camp of the need to look for a new host site, and GSC, their sponsoring organization, was similarly adamant in urging the camp leadership to take more agency in that direction. Throughout those changes in EC leadership, though, it was apparent that few efforts were being made to look for a site, and on multiple occasions I had to shoot down conversations which became focused on seeking an extension to their stay with us as the solution to their host needs.

On October 23 I was informed that the camp was still failing to find a new host, and the request was again made for Bethel to apply for an extension while they finally ramped up their search. Were we to deny them this extension, they would need to disband (echoing the situation which predated their arrival at Bethel). Without going into details, this was not the first time camp leadership had made promises or assurances to the congregation which were not followed up on. Hoping to give them one last chance, however, I agreed in that meeting with the ECs and

GSC representation to sign off on an extension to their stay with us with the following conditions:

- (1) 2 weeks would be added to their stay with us (moving their departure to November 14)
- (2) The application for an extension would be for 45 days – BUT any days beyond November 14 were ONLY usable if the camp located another site and began the permit/etc process to stay there.
- (3) If another location was found, then the camp would need to move to that site as expeditiously as possible, regardless of how many days were technically left on the extension with Bethel.

Throughout November there was no sign of progress on locating a new site. On November 13 I met with the UWS leaders and GSC representation (and, I believe, with Kim Lancaster). At this meeting I was shown a letter from the Lancasters requesting that we keep UWS on our site for the full 45 days and that after that the couple would be willing to host UWS as a bridge between our location and another site to be determined. From my perspective, this proposal indicated that the camp leadership had once again failed to live up to their end of an agreement with the church, and I was not willing to trust them any further. I informed them that they would need to depart from the site, but gave them an extra 2 days to do so – extending the departure date to November 16.

When news began to circulate that the camp was leaving, several residents abandoned it, and I was asked if the camp could extend their departure process to compensate. I asked them to be as expeditious as possible, and left it at that. On November 20, nearly 3 weeks after the originally agreed-upon departure date, the camp finished moving off of the Bethel property.

UWS's stay with us was, generally, pleasant. Candidly, however, there were several incidents which were frustrating to deal with – generally in regards to expectations or policies which were ignored or stretched – and their ultimate departure served as yet another example of this. Still, I do not regret hosting the camp, and I – and the people of Bethel – wish them nothing but the best in their search for safe housing and meaningful community.

Blessings,
Pastor Chris Ode
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