

PRISON REFORM NOT A WELCOME NEIGHBOR

Greenville residents see house as threat

-
- **BYLINE:** Cathy Mong Dayton Daily News
 - **DATE:** March 24, 2002
 - **PUBLICATION:** Dayton Daily News (OH)
 - **EDITION:** CITY
 - **SECTION:** NEWS
 - **PAGE:** 1A
-

GREENVILLE - John D. Graham saw potential in the 1879 two-story brick **house** he bought for \$50,000.

Some of his neighbors, however, see that potential as a threat. Graham sees the home as a means to an idealistic end, a Koinonia House (kone-a-'NIA) - meaning "fellowship" in Greek - in which the potential of released prison inmates may be realized by enveloping them in a structured, family-like environment.

Graham, 53, and his wife, Katherine, 58, are preparing for their first resident, stripping crackled decades of hues from oak woodwork and wall coverings exposing the home's original stenciled designs, as "for sale" signs pop up like spring hyacinths around the East Third Street neighborhood.

"We've counted as many as 24 signs in the blocks surrounding us," said Graham, who graduated in 1991 with a master's degree in divinity from the Earlham College School of Religion in Richmond, Ind. "It saddens me, because we're going to make this a better place to live."

Graham said people mistakenly call the post-prison ministry a halfway house, group home and state institution. "We are none of those," he said. "We have opened our home to men who happen to have served time in prison. They are free men."

Sometime this summer, the Grahams hope to open their remodeled home to up to four convicted felons who are about to take their first tentative steps outside prison.

Experts in penal reform say that is a critical period for a released inmate, when structure and support could mean the difference between adjusting to mainstream society or falling back into old habits, said Ed Rhine of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

Rhine, a sociologist, is in charge of a 2-year-old program called Re-Entry, which is just getting off the ground.

Although he said he is unfamiliar with Koinonia House National Ministries, Rhine said the practices outlined by the national prison ministry are sound. The Illinois-based Koinonia House, a charitable 501-3C organization, opened in 1991 and offers close monitoring and mentoring, spiritual and financial guidance, and networks the resident with business and community leaders. Length of stay is 15 to 24 months.

The Greenville site is the first Koinonia House outside of Illinois, where two others operate. It will be a separate ministry governed by a local board of directors and dependent on private, not state or federal, funding. The board represents various churches in the area.

"My wife and I are simply sharing our home, showing our faith," Graham said.

Most people opposing the ministry do not understand the rigorous selection process each inmate must undergo, Graham said.

First, no one convicted of a murder, sex crime or arson is considered for Koinonia House placement. Working with prison chaplains, Graham and board members will interview potential residents three to six months prior to their prison release. An in-depth, 32-page application also is completed.

If the individual is committed to the program's structure, he or she will be met at release and taken directly to Greenville, without first seeing family members or having any other type of post-prison excursion.

Recent Greenville City Council meetings have been devoted to debating the pros and cons of Koinonia House. City officials have said the Grahams have complied with all zoning ordinances.

Steve and Stacy Lee live across the street from the Grahams at 435 E. Third St. They have listed their home with a realtor and plan to move.

"We're not too happy," said Lee, 27, who works in Covington. He and his wife fear for the safety of their 2-year-old son, Conner.

"We're not against giving people second chances," he said, ". . . but not here. Seems it could go somewhere else, a more rural setting, not three blocks from bars or two blocks from an elementary school."

The Lees have not spoken with the Grahams, but have received information from the national Koinonia program. Lee said the structure sounds positive, "but they also said they're supposed to

build a strong community bond. But the way he's done this, people look at him like a deceitful man."

Chris Boyd lives in his boyhood home at 502 E. Third St. The neighborhood is "wall-to-wall kids and elderly, and single women," Boyd said. He's opposed to the ministry, as are more than 380 others who have signed petitions in an effort to stop the project.

He, like others, doesn't have a problem with the program, only the locale. His business, Boyd Cleaners, has operated across the alley from his home for 60 years. "I have people telling me they won't come here any more if this opens."

"Everybody opposing the house thinks it's a good idea - only somewhere else," said Darke County Common Pleas Judge Jon Hein, who supports the Grahams.

"The concept of supervising people out of prison is crucial to stopping repeat offenses. The state parole system doesn't have enough resources, nor is it expected to supervise people that intensely."

Hein said ex-felons already live in Darke County, but they are unsupervised.

"The adjustment these parolees have to make once they return to society is incredible. We have parolees, sex offenders who might come here from Kentucky, living here," Hein said. "I give John Graham credit. . . . I've been doing this for 17 years, and he hasn't tried to hide (anything) from the people."

According to the state, 48 ex-convicts live in Darke County. "Nobody knows where they live," Graham said. "They're unsupervised. What we're offering is actually safer."

Boyd disagrees. "Those 40 or so people, we don't hear a peep out of them and as long as they abide by the law, nobody bothers them. They're from here," he emphasized.

Re-entry is a big issue, and for good reason. The country is experiencing the largest release of prisoners in its history. More than 630,000 people - four times the number released in 1980 - will be released this year. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than 40 percent of those released today return to prison within three years. Ohio has a little better recidivism rate, 32.5 percent, said Andrea Dean, a state Department of Rehabilitation and Correction spokeswoman.

She said the state doesn't keep tabs of ex-prisoners who enter post-prison programs, such as Koinonia House.

But Graham said those who complete the Koinonia House program have posted a zero percent recidivism after three years, and a 17 percent recidivism after 10 years.

Rhine, who leads the state penal system's Re-Entry program, said he is skeptical of those percentages, but agreed in principal to Koinonia House practices.

He said thousands of Ohio offenders are, or soon will be, going home "in numbers historically unparalleled. . . . Folks are looking at the faith community as an untapped resource. We're reaching out to that community to be involved with us."

Graham left a lucrative business in the building trades in San Antonio, Texas, before entering the seminary. He has taught ethics at Edison State Community College in Piqua and written articles for daily newspapers in Piqua and Sidney. He is working on his doctorate in historic Christian mentoring, a concept he said is the long-forgotten premise of Christianity.

He left the mainstream church, he said, because "we kept taking care of our own, but didn't reach outside the walls to the majority of people who don't come to church. I looked hard at the outcasts, and that led me to prison work."

Graham's nomadic search for a spiritual home has taken him from Preble and Miami counties to Greenville seven years ago. Dissatisfied with a mainstream church, Graham and several others began meeting at the Sater Street Bar. "I called it 'Theology on Tap,' " Graham said. "We had wonderful services under the Budweiser sign."

Now, he and about 25 congregants gather in a local motel meeting room for worship.

"What we're doing is what the church used to do," he said. "We're not doing anything new. It's what the church should have been doing for 2,000 years."

Graham asks his critics to keep an eye on the house's return to splendor and apply it to Koinonia's mission.

"Don't look at what is. Look at what it will be."

COUNCIL MEETING

REGULAR SESSION

May 7, 2002

The Council of the City of Greenville met in regular session at 7:30 P.M. in the Council Room, Municipal Building, Greenville, Ohio. President Hauberg was presiding and the following members were present at roll call: List, Perry, Smith, Burkett, Floyd, Gruber and Jenkins.

The minutes of the April 16th meeting were approved with a correction to paragraph number 7, page number 7898, showing a correction to the vote.

Concerning the agenda, added was an executive session to be held immediately following the approval of the agenda and an executive session following the Call of Council. Gruber moved the agenda be approved as amended and the motion passed as follows: Yea-List, Perry, Smith, Burkett, Floyd, Gruber and Jenkins.

List moved to rise to an executive session to discuss pending and threatened litigation and the motion passed as follows: Yea-List, Perry, Smith, Burkett, Floyd, Gruber and Jenkins.

Executive session began at 7:32 P.M.

Hauberg declared the executive session concluded at 7:55 P.M.

The meeting reconvened in open session.

PUBLIC HEARING

Chris Boyd, 502 East Third Street, addressed Council. Boyd requested a response as a result of the meeting Law Director Amick had with representatives of the Koinonia House.

Amick stated he has addressed a letter to the Council and Administration with his opinion. Amick summarized the letter. Amick stated the City, as a government body, can do little to control the establishment of the Koinonia House. Amick stated he has reviewed all applicable state law, case law and zoning laws. Amick stated the House would fit within the definition of a "family" as established in the City's zoning ordinance. Amick stated a family is defined as no more than four (4) unrelated persons living in a house.

Amick stated the only recourse the neighbors would have would be to take civil action.