



Westminster Presbyterian Church in south Salem is hosting a couple that lives in their RV as part of the Safe Parking program. (Courtesy/ Ted Burney)

When Ted Burney's congregation decided to allow a couple living in their camper to stay in the Salem church's parking lot, he felt it met their goal of "being a welcoming congregation."

Church members at Westminster Presbyterian Church had discussed allowing people to stay in the parking lot as part of the city's Safe Parking Network, which allows people who live in their vehicles to stay in empty parking lots overnight.

A couple has been staying in the church parking lot in south Salem since mid- January. "It's been relatively easy, I'll tell you that much," Burney said.

He said the big thing is to be welcoming. But he also said it was important to get backing from neighbors, who he said were all on board.

The church took the concept through multiple committees and evaluated the risks and benefits, agreeing to host up to two families living in an RV or trailer for 90 days.

They got one couple and provide them a 110-volt outlet and a Wi-Fi hotspot.

Burney said the couple helps keep an eye on the church grounds at night. He said the church was recently vandalized before the couple got there and hosting allows church members to focus their energy on people rather than repairing things.

The Safe Parking program, which is run by homeless service provider Church at the Park, typically offers people a place to sleep at night with a requirement they have to move by the morning.

But Burney said the church opted to provide a 24/7 place to park.

“Like many involved in the program, they have health issues,” Burney explained. “It’s difficult for them to focus on work, stable housing and regaining health if they have to leave and tootle around in the morning.”

Burney said he read [a Salem Reporter article](#) about the program and contacted Jared Garson, an intern who was tasked with finding new locations with little success.

Garson said he was able to add two new locations by the time his internship wrapped up in December – the spots at Westminster.

There are 175 people on a waiting list for the Safe Parking program. Fourteen other churches host people for the program.

Garson said an overwhelming number of people he contacted said they were sympathetic, but they had bad experiences in the past.

“They were all expecting others to step up instead,” he said.

Garson believes the way for this program to be successful is for neighbors to voice their support for having a program in their neighborhood, rather than having someone from the city contact to ask.

“It really takes so little effort to allow people to stay in parking lot after you’re closed,” he said.

“It’s a hugely voluntary program that requires the generosity and commitment of community members to work.”



Westminster Presbyterian Church in south Salem. (Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter)

Burney also hopes others will step up to offer people living in their cars a place to park at night. He said people are hesitant to take that first step, but it's important for those considering the program to know what their limitations are.

"And then meet the people and lay out what you expect from them, and they'll ask you what you can provide and I think it'll all work out real well," he said. At this point, he said he's "openly optimistic."

The church met the couple before they moved onto the lot.

Burney said, "They're just nice folks apparently who are a little down on their luck. Hopefully we can provide a base of stability to get them back in the groove they want to attain."



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