



Rev. Drake is sentenced to help the homeless.

Rev. Drake Wins a Moral Victory

by Robert Norse

The homeless community of Orange County's Buena Park won a rare victory on September 19, when Rev. Wiley Drake was spared jail, fines, or probation and commended for his work by the sentencing judge.

Drake, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Buena Park, had been convicted of four misdemeanors in July for housing homeless people in his church. In response, Drake, his homeless guests, and the broader congregation all held firm, declaring they were willing to support Drake — even if it meant developing a ministry in jail, or joining him there.

Seeing this, North Orange County Municipal Judge Gregory Prickett sentenced the determined churchman to 1500 hours of community service, but then declared that community service already had been done through Drake's work in housing the homeless — the very "crime" for which Drake was dragged through the courts. Prickett also declined to put Drake on probation — a prudent move, considering

Drake had vowed to continue housing the 70 homeless people now living in his church or go to jail with them if they were evicted.

The First Baptist Church itself was put on informal probation for three years. The prosecutor took this to mean that he could drag the church back to court the next day if they were still housing homeless people, since it had been convicted of "changing the zoning use of a building" and "allowing camping on church property." Church officials could face up to two years in jail and \$4000 in fines if that happens.

Judge Prickett told John Bryan, who signed the probation papers for the church, to return to court on November 14 to prove the church was making "reasonable progress" towards finding a suitable new structure in which to house the homeless. However, the judge added that he himself was engaged in a food ministry and found it a shame that criminal charges had even been brought into court on the matter. Prickett faces reelection in 1998.

More than 200 people reportedly

were at the sentencing along with national media. Homeless women and men from other cities also attended the hearing in support of Drake. Homeless activist Larry Milligan of San Diego had promised to join Drake at his church and replace him in supporting the homeless people there, should Drake be jailed.

Drake reports that Buena Park police have stepped up their harassment of the homeless. The result is a significant increase of homeless people coming into his church, as well as a decrease in the number of poor families in his neighborhood willing to visit Drake's church and face possible retaliation from authorities. Drake has long operated a neighborhood food distribution program serving hundreds of Latino families in the area.

Drake's church is also under the shadow of a civil injunction requiring him to move homeless people out of the enclosed, windowed, and heated patio area. That injunction is on hold, pending appeal. Drake is optimistic about his prospects.