

This is a printer friendly version of an article from GoUpstate.com

To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

---

Article published May 11, 2006

## Company lifts ban on tenants' Bible study

**JASON SPENCER, Staff Writer**

The ban of Bible studies in the common area of Heritage Court Apartments has been lifted -- temporarily, at least -- while the company that owns and operates that complex awaits guidance from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Raleigh, N.C.-based One Management's decision to wait before making a "final decision" comes in the face of a growing number of federal officials telling the company to reverse course permanently.

S.C. Attorney General Henry McMaster, citing a story in Wednesday's Herald-Journal, announced an investigation into whether the ban constitutes religious discrimination. He called the decision a felonious violation of state law, and said he is willing to prosecute anyone behind it.

"Once he knows the facts, he'll understand why we've taken the position that we have," One Management Vice President Jenny Petri said. "Our position is that we're trying to prevent discrimination, not cause it."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., hosted a conference call Wednesday with Petri and Linda Cruciani, assistant general counsel for Fair Housing at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Earlier, he had faxed a letter to One Management telling the company that the Bible studies in question could legally be held.

"There's a general feeling out there that somehow anything to do with religion is suspect," Inglis said later. "That is not the case. It's not what the Constitution says, it's not what the Supreme Court says, and it should not be the corporate policy of the people who run Heritage Court Apartments."

One Management this month chose to disallow Bible studies in the common areas of the 40 to 50 complexes it owns across Virginia and the Carolinas.

The company cited the federal Fair Housing Act, which prohibits religious discrimination, as being behind its reasoning. But as the Herald-Journal reported Wednesday, U.S. Housing and Urban Development officials say the company is misinterpreting that act. And according to the Justice Department, the ban is a potential violation of it.

"They call it Fair Housing, but it's always going to be not fair for somebody," Heritage Court resident Marilyn Conley said this week.

Petri drafted a letter Wednesday to Heritage Court residents informing them that they could resume their weekly Bible Study in the complex's common area -- for now.

"It's great," Bob Bryant said. "If we can still have the Bible study ... and the woman who plays the piano could still play the piano, and we could have the gospel singing groups in. To me, that's all we wanted."

Petri's original notice to One Management's residents was that Bible studies, hymn singing and nativity scenes could be seen as that company displaying a preference to a certain religious group, or a preference of religious people over those who aren't. She encouraged tenants to hold studies in private apartments, which residents feared wouldn't be large enough to accommodate them.

And while HUD officials conceded that nativity scenes might be cause for "some concern," Bible studies are different. Bible studies in common areas of apartment complexes are OK, as long as any group that wants to hold a similar event is allowed, they said.

"They missed it completely," said McMaster, who is running for re-election. "The federal Fair Housing Act not only says these people can conduct these meetings, it says the management cannot preclude them from doing it. And they haven't read the state statutes at all."

Petri called the Bible study question "a no-win situation." She says she called the Justice Department personally to ask for help.

"All we want to do is the right thing," Petri said. "No matter which way we turn, we could be said to be discriminating."

In a letter to residents earlier this week, Petri stated, "We do not want to take any of your rights away, and will explore all options to make sure that we do not do so. We just need to make sure that we are not discriminating against others in the process."

Inglis hopes to attend Monday's Bible study to show support.

He called the situation a "chilling of First Amendment rights," saying that fear is causing a corporation to ask for government permission so people could exercise their rights.

"You can't have a free society if people are running scared," Inglis said. "You can only have a free society if you have people who are courageous enough to say, 'We're going to publish our papers, and write what we want on the Internet, and worship how we want: We're courageous enough to say we're free Americans.' "

A Justice Department spokesman did not return a call Wednesday seeking comment.

Jason Spencer can be reached at 562-7214, or [jason.spencer@shj.com](mailto:jason.spencer@shj.com).

---