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It's official: Bible study allowed in apartments

JASON SPENCER, Staff Writer

Life at Heritage Court Apartments should soon get back to normal, following a decision by its owner -- letter from the federal government in hand -- to once again allow Bible studies in the complex's common areas.

It's the epilogue to a brief, but tumultuous time in the lives of the 20-or-so residents who hold the weekly study in Heritage Court's community room.

"We're thrilled, of course," resident Marilyn Conley said. "We've had more people coming than we had before. We feel really pleased with that, and maybe bringing it to the public's attention will save somebody else from going through something like this."

Earlier this month, Raleigh, N.C.-based One Management Inc. sent a memo to residents at Heritage Courts (and the other 40-plus properties it owns across the Carolinas and Virginia) disallowing Bible studies in common areas. The company cited the federal Fair Housing Act, which prohibits religious discrimination, saying that allowing such studies could make people of different faiths -- or people who aren't religious at all -- feel as if they were being discriminated against.

That didn't fly.

Not with the state Attorney General's Office, which threatened to charge those involved in the decision with felonious violations of Civil Rights laws. Not with U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, who had several conversations with One Management's Jenny Petri, and sent Petri a stern letter telling her the right thing to do would be to reinstate the Bible studies. And not with the various conservative legal and action groups, who threatened lawsuits on behalf of Heritage Court residents, and some even offered to prep those residents for court proceedings "just in case."

And, according to the U.S. Justice Department, the decision not only wasn't in line with the Fair Housing Act, it was a

violation of it.

But One Management stood its ground.

The decision was made to temporarily allow Bible studies once the story appeared in the Herald-

Journal, which sparked much of the furor among politicians. But nothing permanent would be decided until the company had, in writing, an OK from the feds.

That came this week in the form of a four-page letter from Linda Cruciani, assistant general counsel for Fair Housing Enforcement at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The letter reinforces much of what the Herald-Journal already has reported -- that religious activities are permitted as long as they are voluntary, and as long as anyone has the same ability to hold such activities.

"The Fair Housing Act does not prohibit religious expression; it requires that applicants and tenants for housing be treated equally without regard to their particular religion. The Heritage Court Apartments ... may allow religious activities in the common areas of these properties," Cruciani stated.

"I'm very pleased that the original information we received was inaccurate," said Petri, One Management's vice president. "Fortunately, the residents will be able to continue with their Bible study in the community room."

Inglis said he was glad to see so many people and groups rallying around the residents at Heritage Court, but was disappointed that a "permission slip from a government lawyer" was necessary before a hard decision was made.

"It's very important for citizens to insist on exercise of their constitutional rights, rather than wait for permission to exercise those rights," Inglis said. "We need no writing beyond the First Amendment of the Constitution on matters of the free expression of our faith."

Inglis, an attorney, called the situation a "great teaching opportunity" and "a great reminder of how powerful the Constitution is."

He did concede that the ease, regularity and rapidity with which people file lawsuits these days could have pressured One Management (in this case) to be too careful in trying to protect itself.

"That is definitely one of the negative impacts of living in a litigious society," Inglis said. "But we really need to refresh ourselves on Civics 101, and how clear the U.S. Constitution is on this topic. It's a wonderful document that's very clear. We really shouldn't have to wait for permission slips."

Conley, at Heritage Court, is just glad it's over.

"You can't just take people's rights away without looking into it. Really, I don't think they even understood what they did," she said.

"We got enough press coverage to let people know this does happen: You have to look out for your rights."

Jason Spencer can be reached at 562-7214, or jason.spencer@shj.com.
