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Parsonage turned into city's only maternity home By Ellis Choe

Calgary's only maternity home for young unwed mothers is opening its doors this month.

Emma House, the renovated parsonage of the Emmanuel Christian Reformed Church, is giving girls with crisis pregnancies a place to stay until their babies are born.

"It's to provide a Christian alternative to abortion for a lot of girls in desperate straits," said Jim Amsing, president of the Emma House Society and a deacon at Emmanuel, "As Christians we're called to respond to crises in society."

The name Emma House was derived from a combination of the first two letters of the words Emmanuel and maternity.

"And in a book of baby names, Emma means healer," Amsing said.

Reading from the society's mission statement, board secretary Margaret Oostenbrink said, "Our goal is to care for the physical and spiritual welfare of these girls and the expectant child. The supporting community will have the opportunity to be the open arms of Jesus to those who need help in these situations."

Located in the southwest community of Glendale Meadows, Emma House is able to accommodate up to three girls. During their stay, the women will be offered counseling and taught life skills such as budgeting, cooking, nutrition, and parenting.

Along with house parents Terry and Wendy Russell, volunteers have been recruited to be "birthing partners". Their role will be to develop friendships and support the girls throughout the pregnancies.

Reconciliation between the young mothers and their families is another aim of the ministry.

"After the baby's born," Amsing said. "The girl has several options. She can go home, live on her own where we'll assist her, or live in a shepherding home set-up (in which she placed with a Christian family)."

Since it's inception in 1985, the Calgary Pregnancy Centre (CCPC) has used the shepherding home concept to support girls during their pregnancies.

But the centre's executive director Wendy Lowe said "Not all girls are suitable for living with a Christian family. The difference between a shepherding home a maternity home is that some of the girls aren't in a place where they want to be in a fostering family unit versus being cared for in a maternity home.

For this reason, Lowe calls Emma House “an answer to prayer.”

The CCPC is an established leader in the city among pro-life agencies educating women about abortion.

Already providing pregnancy testing, counseling and various forms of practical assistance, the CCPC has been given the additional responsibility of screening and referring all girls wishing to enter Emma House.

“The average age of our clients is 12 to 45 from every socio-economic background, but for the most part unwed mothers who would end up in Emma House will probably be 15 to 25. Girls looking for housing tend to be in that age bracket,” Lowe said.

There have been no maternity homes in Calgary since the Salvation Army’s Parkwood House closed in June 1989 due to insufficient government funding.

“Parkwood House was more like an institution, but Emma House is a group home, more personal and geared towards a family setting,” Lowe said.

When the 20-year-old Parkwood House shut down, the Calgary Crisis Pregnancy Centre’s board address the need for a maternity home, but was unable to organize one with its limited resources.

“We put it on the back burner and prayed about it,” Lowe said. “Then Jim Amsing walked into my office one day and asked if there was a need for a maternity home.”

The vision came to Amsing last November when ideas of possibly selling the Emmanuel Christian Reformed parsonage were circulating.

“But what sparked it was the abortion clinic in Kensington and what kind of Christian response we could provide for these girls,” Amsing said. “I had no idea whether there were maternity homes or not. Wendy indicated they were looking for this kind of thing for years. From that point on, it went fairly quickly. In the past six months, we’ve been putting it all together.

“The Lord’s just been working. It’s His plan. It’s just coming together. Obviously the Lord wanted this to happen.”

Board Secretary Margaret Oostenbrink agreed, “We’ve really felt the Lord’s blessing on this ministry. Whatever we’ve asked for we’ve received right away. We’ve received cash gifts and many items for the home.”

Jack Dykxhoorn, treasurer of the Emma House Society, estimated it would cost about \$28,000 a year to keep the home running.

“We’ve already received \$3100 from one church collection”, Dykxhoorn said.

While relying chiefly on donations, Dykxhoorn added each girl will be asked to pay \$300 a month for room and board from the money they are eligible to receive through Alberta Social Services.

But Amsing said, “In really needy cases if they don’t have the money, the fee will probably be waived.”

Fully supportive of the project, Emmanuel Christian Reformed has during the first year voted to charge only \$1 rent for its old parsonage. It has also agreed to make up any shortfall in the home’s operating expenses.

“But we’d like to make that as little as possible,” Dykxhoorn said.

Those interested in supporting Emma House are encouraged to join the society for a nominal annual fee.

For more information, Amsing can be reached at 949-2651.