

Lifestyle

CLERGY UPSET WITH O'CONNOR OFFICIALS

By **Rick Brewer**

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STOCKTON - A group of Stockton clergy is unhappy with the management of O'Connor Woods Retirement Community, saying it has been unwilling to negotiate a contract with its employees.

More than 200 housekeepers, maintenance staff and certified nursing assistants work at the north Stockton center. A vote is set for Nov. 2 to recertify or decertify the facility's caregiver union. No labor contract has been signed since the National Labor Relations Board certified the union in February 2006. Most members earn \$7.50 to \$9 per hour.

The clergy, mostly from Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Episcopal and Lutheran churches as well as Rabbi Jason Gwasdoff of Temple Israel, hold worship services in the facility's chapel. O'Connor Woods is sponsored by a Catholic order, the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, and the clergy say management should hold Judeo-Christian values and ethics in a higher regard than secular labor-relations practices.

"We understand that pay issues in the retirement home community is a systemic problem," said the Rev. Mark Hall, pastor of St. Anne's Episcopal Church. "But in this situation, there hasn't been clarity or openness from the beginning, and it's troubling."

The clerics say they have witnessed managers of the nonprofit O'Connor Woods engage in a series of stall tactics and union-busting maneuvers that include a failure to provide financial statements.

"We've tried to remain neutral as much as we can in the context of our fight for social justice," said Connie Johnstone, a board-certified chaplain who works at St. Joseph's Medical Center, a Catholic Healthcare West facility. "But dignity of workers is a cornerstone of every single faith tradition."

O'Connor Woods' executive director, Scot Sinclair, said he's not sure what biblical example would force negotiations to move more quickly and said the facility overseen by the Dominican Sisters has held high ethical standards for 17 years. A spokeswoman for the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael refused comment about the ongoing negotiations.

Previously, Service Employees International Union United Healthcare Workers-West lodged many of the same complaints. Union officials said the facility's management intimidated caregivers, held mandatory anti-union meetings, denied access to union representatives, refused to bargain in good faith and once ordered an employee sympathetic to the union removed from the property because she spoke to co-workers about contract negotiations.

Union spokesman Mason Stockstill said workers in many hospitals and care facilities throughout various Catholic

health-care systems are represented. But he said managers at O'Connor Woods have been averse to bargain consistently or come to any real conclusion on wages and benefits.

"In our opinion, O'Connor Woods is not treating their workers to the same standards as other Catholic health-care institutions," Stockstill said. "And it's not just the fact they don't have the same standards, but they don't realize that a union is a way of achieving that. We're not seeing the kind of confrontation at other facilities as we're seeing with O'Connor Woods."

Clergy say the stalled negotiations are particularly worrisome because Catholicism embraces collective bargaining. The Vatican II council of bishops in the mid-1960s declared unions a basic right of workers. Pope John Paul II affirmed that in several speeches.

The Rev. Carol Been, deputy director of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, said several pastors and priests asked to pray with the bargaining team at a September negotiation session, but managers refused and walked away. Sinclair said managers often pray before meetings, but the clerics showed up unannounced and uninvited to the bargaining session in question.

"This impasse is particularly disappointing because O'Connor Woods is religious-based," Been said.

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