

# Judge sides with allergen-free church

Thursday, July 26, 2007

**By Matt Vande Bunte**  
**The Grand Rapids Press**

GEORGETOWN TOWNSHIP -- The leader of a church that sought to build an allergen-free worship center feels vindicated by a legal opinion that the township's opposition breached federal law.

Still, construction of a \$1.2 million building at 7277 40th Ave. may be a long shot for the Great Lakes Society for Biblical Research. The congregation that includes people with acute allergies and sensitivities to chemicals has dwindled to only a handful of participants.

"We were more or less paralyzed (for the past five years)," said John Cheetham, church pastor. "No decision has been made on what the next step is."

The church, founded in 1974, sought a special-use permit in 2002 to build a 9,700-square-foot, two-story building south of Baldwin Street in a residential area. The plan called for a 2,400-square-foot, 60-seat sanctuary, but the township's zoning board ruled the building was not eligible for a permit because it was more "commercial, fraternal, health-related services and product-oriented" than worship-oriented. The society practices a health ministry that enables members to order chemical-free foods.

In a recent opinion, Ottawa County Circuit Judge Calvin Bosman agreed the township violated the church's religious freedom under the Constitution and a Religious Land Use Act signed into law in 2000 by then-President Clinton.

"Judge Bosman has done a great deal to help us rebuild our reputation," Cheetham said. "He acknowledged that we were trying to build a special building to cater to people with chemical sensitivity. For us, it's an important part of Christ's mission ... to recognize the special needs of people." Bosman ruled the proposed building qualifies as a church because people would gather there to worship. The township's opposition obstructs the church's religious freedom, he wrote.

"There is no dispute that the members of (the society) are physically unable to attend worship services in any conventional church," Bosman wrote. "The (township's) action effectively prevents the members ... from worshipping at all."

Craig Noland, a Grand Rapids attorney representing the township, said he is considering an appeal.  
-- Press Religion Editor Charles Honey contributed to this story.