April 7, 2010

Dear Calvin Student,

Over the last few months there have been conversations on campus about off-campus students and the Grand Rapids Housing Code, specifically language in the code that states only “up to four (4) unrelated persons” may live in a home.

These conversations began in the fall of 2009 because there were 15 cases in which Calvin students were cited by the police for not abiding by the city’s rules, which created problems for the students and for the neighbors.

In December 2009, Calvin students received a letter explaining that the college would be more clearly addressing this issue for the 2010-11 academic year. Our expectation was that students planning to live off campus in the city of Grand Rapids in 2010-11 would not have more than four unrelated people in their housing unit.

“It is important to understand,” we wrote, “the college’s commitment to support and honor this specific part of the Grand Rapids City Code. This commitment will include some measure of accountability, meaning that anyone found in violation with the city will also be in violation of Calvin College policy.”

After numerous listening sessions, conversations with the student and faculty senates and feedback from the Calvin board, parent council, college leaders, the police, the city of Grand Rapids, landlords, neighbors and neighborhood associations, the college decided to create a set of clear policies to guide our students who live off campus. The college wants students to live as informed citizens, responsible neighbors and followers of Christ. The following policies for off-campus housing also have been established to support our surrounding cities and neighbors:

1. The 2010-11 Student Conduct Code will specifically list living in compliance with applicable zoning ordinances for occupancy as an expectation for all Calvin students. Ordinances vary by municipality, so students will be expected to work closely with landlords in ensuring compliance.

2. The college will now require an accurate and current local address for all students living off campus. Each fall semester, all off-campus residents will be required to electronically register their local addresses, no later than Friday of the first week of class. Failure to do so will result in a $100 fine and a financial “hold” on the student’s account. The hold will be lifted once a student reports a local address.

3. As part of the local address registration process, students will be asked to commit to being a responsible neighbor and to verify via digital signature their compliance with applicable zoning ordinances on occupancy (e.g. no more than four unrelated adults may reside in most residential housing units in the city of Grand Rapids; Kentwood zoning is based on square footage and number of bedrooms; etc.). If students are unable to honestly confirm compliance, they will have the opportunity to explain their housing situation on the form. If honest, the college will do their best to work with students.

4. Students found to be living in violation of applicable zoning ordinances will be subject to any or all of the following:
a. For 2010-11, a fine of $100 per student, per semester, will be levied until the situation is verifiably resolved. This fine will increase to $500 per student in violation, per semester, beginning in the fall of 2011. Note: this fine is independent of any action the city may take against occupants or landlords, and in no way exempts students from the requirements of applicable local ordinances.

b. A letter of non-compliant housing will be filed in the student’s college record.

c. The college will affirm addresses if requested by city authorities who are formally investigating specific violations of occupancy ordinances.

d. Apart from any current or future college response, students face consequences from city authorities as defined in zoning ordinances, including evictions and other civil penalties for non-compliance.

5. Students who provide false information during the local address registration process will be subject to further disciplinary action by the college. The reason for the small fine this coming year is to encourage all students to tell the truth about where and with whom they live. Next year the college hopes all students will have had adequate time to make legal living arrangements.

For further information please reference this FAQ.

Already this year the college is organizing a group of students, faculty and staff who wish to work with the city on some new ways to think about college housing and zoning. As well, the college will investigate other resources that might be helpful for students. For example, students have suggested the college consider maintaining a list of rentals that will help them in finding a reasonably priced place, a specific neighborhood, and perhaps a roommate clearinghouse system. In sum, we want to support students with these important decisions.

Let us work together to model, to one another and to our host city, what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Sincerely,

Shirley V. Hoogstra                 C. Robert Crow                 John Witte
VP for Student Life                 Dean of Student Development   Dean of Residence Life