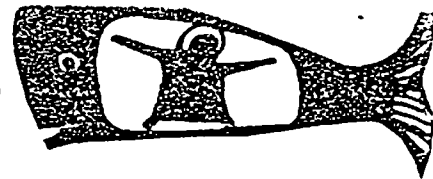


# Fire Damages Homeless Group's Intended Shelter



By SARA RIMER

Mishaps and miracles have always seemed to characterize life at Emmaus House, a small community of homeless men and women in Harlem led by the Rev. David Kirk, a Catholic priest of the Eastern Rite.

The latest mishap occurred early Thursday morning, when fire blazed through an old five-story hotel in East Harlem that the community had spent the last 10 months renovating as a private shelter. The fire destroyed the roof of the 54-room hotel, shattered the windows and damaged several of the rooms that were near completion, including the chapel.

Emmaus House belongs to an international movement of poor people who call themselves ragpickers and support themselves by recycling used goods. Also destroyed in Thursday's fire were the piles of clothing and canned goods that the members of Emmaus House had been collecting for sale at the hotel, across from an abandoned building at the corner of East 124th Street and Lexington Avenue.

Investigators suspect the fire was set, perhaps someone from the neighborhood disgruntled over Emmaus House's purchase of what used to be a hotel patronized by drug dealers and prostitutes.

By yesterday morning, Father Kirk and 10 members of Emmaus House were hard at work at the hotel, clearing the debris and occasionally stopping to warm themselves before a small space heater on the second floor.

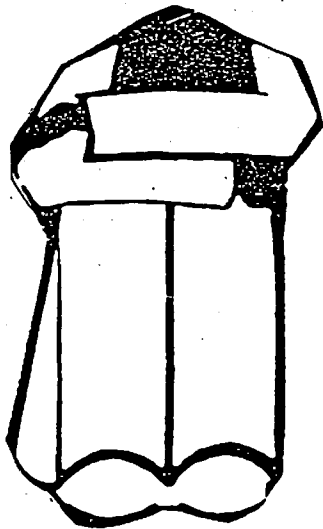
"We went through two days of depression after it happened," Father Kirk said. "I became almost numb. But then we started working again, and our hope and faith has been restored."

The work crew has been led through the winter months by Vincent Evans, who came to Emmaus House after a long struggle with drugs. Mr. Evans is an electronics expert, and one room at

the hotel is filled with the used television sets and radios he was repairing for sale.

At Emmaus House, Father Kirk welcomes everyone, from former drug addicts like Mr. Evans to convicted robbers released from prison with no place to go. Supported by private donations and the sale of recycled goods, the 30 members of Emmaus House live in cramped quarters in an old brownstone at 160 West 120th Street. Since Father Kirk rarely turns anyone away, there are people sleeping in the chapel and the office as well as in a bathroom converted to a bedroom.

Among the mishaps that have occurred at Emmaus House this winter were the theft of the community's stereo set — followed a week later by the donation of another one — and the embezzlement of money from the of-



fice by an Emmaus member.

A piano that had been borrowed from the Ethical Culture Society for a benefit concert was dropped and broken while being returned. Emmaus House, whose members include an old woman who is a jazz and blues virtuoso, still hopes for another piano.

Thursday morning's fire was the third — and by far the most serious — fire at the hotel this winter. Five members of the community had been asleep in the building, the former Charles Hotel, at the time — posted there for security reasons. One of them, a man from Guyana, got the others out safely and ran the 10 blocks across town to Emmaus House, still in his long underwear.

Father Kirk said yesterday that it was the second time a member of the community had come running from the hotel in the middle of the night, yelling about a fire. "The last time it was Tom," he said. "He was shouting, 'The dream is dead, the dream is dead.'"

Emmaus House purchased the hotel a year ago for \$65,000, with most of the money donated by European members of the Emmaus movement. In addition to providing shelter for the homeless and for community members, it will offer meals to the needy. Father Kirk had hoped the shelter could begin operating this spring. The fire has set the date back at least six months, he said.

Somehow untouched by the fire was the red and blue painted wooden sign that reads "Ragpickers of Emmaus." Father Kirk and his followers said they thought it was another small Emmaus miracle.



The New York Times/Dith Pran

The Rev. David Kirk, second from left, with members of Emmaus House outside the hotel they had been renovating before it burned.

**emmaus house**  
160 west 120st./nyc 10027  
(212) 662-7507