Church members are now converting an old bus into living quarters for single men, Hanks said.

Wood stoves are used to heat the house, Hanks said, and wood is donated by the city of Crowley from right-of-way clearing projects. Various businesses also donate shipping pallets that can be cut up for fuel.

The small congregation is a member of the Christian Care Center, which coordinates efforts by Crowley churches to provide food, clothing, assistance with utility bills, transportation, medicine and other needs of indigent residents or transients passing through Acadia Parish. Referrals to the shelter are often made by the sheriff's office, Hanks said.

Recent visitors to Welcome House were two local families whose breadwinners were unable to find work and could not afford housing. Another was a woman in her mid-30s whose family didn't want her any more, Hanks said. "Her family was on welfare, and they just couldn't help her."

Counted among the "permanent" residents are a 63-year-old man who is disabled and a young woman who is a recovering alcoholic. "She was traded as a child for an icebox," said Geri Hanks.

"The family that took her in noticed that she wasn't quite 100 percent right, and they threw her out on the street where she was abused. She's been here five years. She's a part of the house — a blessing to us," she said.

Although some lodgers are part of the nation's permanent, transient homeless population, Hanks said, "there suddenly find themselves in a brand-new position of personal financial difficulty."

Hanks, a former member of the Assemblies of God, and his wife, who grew up in a Catholic home, said only one condition is placed on people seeking shelter at Welcome House — that on Wednesdays and Sundays they either go to church next door or to the church of their choice in Crowley.

"We tell them about that rule when they get here," Hanks said.

"We ask them to allow us to feed them and shelter them," his wife added. "In return, we ask that they allow us to tell them the word of God."

Hanks has many memories of the countless people Welcome House has assisted, but his favorites are the ones with happy endings. He recalled a teen-ager who was "kicked out on the street" because of his rebellion in the home.

"When the sheriff's office found him, he was sleeping in a van in 16-degree weather. We counselled him and put him into adult education classes. He graduated last year and is thinking about joining the Army," Hanks said.

Then there was "Khadafy," a streetwise, cocaine-addicted young man from New York who stumbled into a service one night after being dropped off by a trucker. When no one made a move to throw him out after his interruption, Hanks said, the youth sat down and listened.

"He came in and gave his heart to the Lord. We counselled with him for about 15 minutes, and he went out in the woods and threw away his cocaine," Hanks said.

"Thank the Lord — this is how He uses this church."