

New church gives homeless true sanctuary

By Emily Wierenga | Friday, January 28, 2011

LONDON, ON. "Befriending people living on the streets set Darryl Reckman on the path to becoming the co-founder of a church giving high priority to the poor and excluded.

"As I got to know people on the streets, rather than returning to an empty house after work, I would go back out to the streets to hang out with the people who were becoming my friends," says Reckman, who was working with Toronto's Youth Unlimited.

"The more I hung out with people whose brokenness was so obvious, the easier it became for me to start sharing my own brokenness."

On January 1, the 24-year-old joined Youth for Christ's Streetlight director Gil Clelland to open Sanctuary London, a church for street residents.

"Our hope is that we will...become a healthy, welcoming and all-inclusive community where people who are poor or excluded are particularly valued," says Reckman.

Clelland, a 39-year-old former pastor of a small evangelical church near Thunder Bay, Ontario, credits the new development to a message made by Sanctuary Toronto founder Greg Paul to YFC staff. "He spoke of a transition he undertook in ministering to the poor," says Clelland. "He spoke of moving from 'service' to 'friendship.'"

As Clelland began to make a similar transition, "something happened. We were the church. Our friends from the street saw me as their pastor. Older folks from street level joined us. We celebrated life, mourned together in our losses and rejoiced together in our accomplishments. We were becoming a community."

He knew God was calling him to a new kind of mission. While local churches fed and sheltered the underprivileged, no form of sacred arts community existed for the poor. "We were placing the poor and the impoverished at the centre of our community to be the church with them "something I don't think exists in London," says Clelland.

When First Christian Reformed Church provided both a building and partnership, and Sanctuary Toronto committed to acting as an umbrella organization, Clelland prayerfully resigned from YFC and assumed the role of pastor of Sanctuary London.

"I want to share that the real pastor is Jesus, "and that ministry is done by all," says Clelland. "One of the things we stress is that we are a community first and our roles come second. No one calls me pastor Gil. I am Gil and also a pastor."

Both Clelland and Reckman spend their days on the streets with their congregants. "We have drop-ins where people can come for food, a place to hang out "games, the arts and some sports," says Clelland. "But the greatest thing we offer is a place to belong. We don't need four walls and a roof. We just need a connection with another person."

When not on the streets, the co-founders divide their time between meeting new volunteers "adding to the 45 that help them weekly "and running art programs at the church.

“We try to encourage people toward their dreams and give them a place to learn to dream again,” explains Clelland, who is trained in art history. “One of the reasons we have the arts available “painting, drawing, sculpting “is to tap into a creativity that sometimes gets squashed after years of poverty.”

And every Sunday evening, Clelland and Reckman engage both young and old in an informal worship service. “We sing, we pray, take communion and hear stories from each other,” says Clelland. “We teach and are taught. It is intimate and sometimes quite raw. It is sanctuary.”