

# Impoverished Londoners connected to medicine through Sanctuary

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There are no clinical services available at Sanctuary London, but the unique downtown church supporting people affected by poverty is still teaching nursing students from Western University and Fanshawe College valuable lessons.

Catherine Walsh, a nurse in Stratford's ICU who officially graduates from Western in June, is one of them. Walsh discovered Sanctuary after agreeing to spend three months there during a community placement, which is part of her program. But after witnessing first hand the barriers to medical care some impoverished Londoners face, she decided to continue visiting.

"One of the big things I learned there is the way homeless people are treated in the medical model — I think that it's a very scary place for them," she said. "They have absolutely no respect or faith in doctors or nurses. I think they feel if they come in, people are going to think they're drug seeking

“I think it gave me that perspective that you have to get to know every patient, regardless of what they look like ... before you can make any judgments.”

Started in 2011 by Gil Clelland and Darryl Reckman, Sanctuary London doesn't necessarily fit into a traditional definition of church. They don't have a permanent location (although they do have access to an inviting space through a partnership with Talbot Street Church), nor do they subscribe to a specific denomination of Christianity.

What Sanctuary does offer Londoners is a sense of community, a sense of belonging, the emotional links one finds at home apart from the physical shelter it provides.

“We have a worship service. We have a community of people that enjoy hanging out together. But we stress things that aren't always necessarily stressed in other churches in terms of justice, in terms of poverty,” Clelland said. “Really what we're trying to create is ... a space where people can just be relaxed and be part of something that a lot of our friends here don't have elsewhere.”

Clelland, Sanctuary's pastor, moved from Thunder Bay to London to be part of a Youth For Christ program called Streetlight in 2007. As that community grew, Clelland and Reckman decided to open Sanctuary as an extension based on a church of the same name in Toronto. Now, Sanctuary offers a drop-in program at Talbot Street Church twice per week on Mondays and Wednesdays. It attracts over 200 people per week.

Clelland and Reckman host card games, engage conversations and encourage people to help cook a family-style dinner.

“We all eat together — co-workers and volunteers and people from the streets in impoverished situations, eating the same meal at the same time,” Clelland said. “We play together, we hang out together, we get to know one another. We're trying to create home together. We sense that's the real issue of poverty.”

But it's not the only issue Sanctuary has been tackling. Clelland said access to medical care has been on his radar since he moved to London, a city renowned for its medical expertise.

“It's a pretty big challenge for people on the streets with respect to the medical world — there seems to be some distance between the two,” Clelland said.

Allowing nursing students to be part of the community (Sanctuary receives two per semester) is helping bridge that space. The Council of Ontario University Programs in Nursing recently recognized Sanctuary with a 2014 Agency Award. It's presented annually to an Ontario agency that provides nursing students with exceptional learning experiences.

“To be recognized in all of Ontario is amazing,” Clelland said. “One of the bridges that gets crossed is that our friends here in this space get to recognize that a nurse is somebody who's human.”

The other side, of course, is the perspective nurses receive before they begin their careers.

“I thought that (Sanctuary) sounded like a good experience,” Walsh said. “It allowed me to build a relationship with them and it really (helped me) determine that they're the same as everybody else, they just have a different set of resources available to them.”

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