

# Sanctuary London is a home for the homeless

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Special to The Free Press

Londoner Gil Clelland has a new job: creating a home for the city's homeless.

Clelland, 38, rang in 2011 as the pastor of a new church, Sanctuary London.

He said Sanctuary isn't a traditional church with four walls and a steeple. It isn't even a physical space, but rather a community that fosters a sense of belonging — a place for individuals from all walks of life, with the impoverished at its centre, Clelland said.

"People who are homeless don't feel like they belong anywhere. On the streets, they get 'the look' — the look of not fitting in, of being second class. We want to create a space where they can belong and feel part of something."

Together with Darryl Reckman, 24, Clelland launched Sanctuary on Jan. 1. The church is based on the work of Sanctuary Toronto, a church on Charles St. E that provides many services such as necessities, medical care and counselling, as well as a sense of community, to the city's poor.

Clelland believes a sense of belonging is a foundation for a healthy community, one that encourages those in need to look for, find and maintain support, housing and education.

As the leaders of Sanctuary, Clelland and Reckman spend most of their time on the streets. They talk to the poor, eat with them and listen to their stories, Clelland said.

Reckman, originally from Sarnia, moved to London to pursue a degree in social work at King's University College. Not just for the impoverished, Sanctuary is



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**Gil Clelland, right, paints with Mike Bieber in the basement of the Empress United Church. Clelland is the pastor of Sanctuary London, which ministers to the city's poor.**

home for himself and Clelland, Reckman said.

"When you hang out with someone who is vulnerable and in need, it allows you the freedom to share your hurts and needs. I feel like I can be more of myself with them."

Sanctuary hosts two weekly drop-in evenings at Empress United Church on Blackfriars St. There's a community meal and a space to relax, play games and spend time together. On Sundays, there is a worship service.

Clelland said Sanctuary will need its own building, preferably downtown, where it would be within walking distance for most of the city's poor. Out of this space, Sanctuary would provide a communal place as

well as social and medical services.

The building would provide not only a sense of belonging, but also a physical space London's poor can call home, Clelland said.

Though Sanctuary is new, Clelland has been doing its work for some time. In 2006, he moved to London from Thunder Bay to work with Youth for Christ as the director of Streetlight, an outreach program for street-involved youth. He said he is still working with Streetlight.

Mike Bieber, 29, was on the streets of London for four years. He was involved with Streetlight. Though he has a home now, he said he plans to be part of Sanctuary.

"There is a sense of community here and a sense of belonging. It's a good support network where I can meet friends," he said.

"I want to be a role model for others in my old situation, to show them they don't have to take the route I did."

Sanctuary drop-in times are Mondays and Wednesdays at 2 p.m. at Empress United Church. It's using the space rented by the First Christian Reformed Church and will work out of the church's Talbot St. location after renovations are complete in September.

Sanctuary funding comes from private donations. For more information or to make a donation, call Gil Clelland at 519-902-9774.