

Building a Community to Call Home

JEANETTE DUNCAN

Mike came to the streets of London, Ontario to find, in his words, “better drugs” to dull the pain of his abusive childhood. But in the end, he found friends, and the healing of Jesus.

Sanctuary London, lead by Gil Clelland and Darryl Reckman, serves the impoverished people living in London’s downtown. “Our church is about being in and among the most impoverished in the city,” says Clelland. “It’s about creating a place they can call home.”

For the past four years, Clelland and Reckman worked with London Youth For Christ’s Streetlight program, aimed at street youth aged 16-24 years. The hardest part of this ministry is building trust. “Most have been hurt or rejected by authority and have been abused,” explains Gil. “Trust is something that happens over a long period of time.” And over the years, as they persisted, a community grew.

Then, a turning point came. To stay true to their mandate, Youth For Christ requested that they limit their ministry to 16-24 year olds. However, neither Clelland nor Reckman felt comfortable abandoning their older friends. And, they realized, their community had become a church. “We were worshipping together, we were studying the scriptures, we’d had baptisms,” says Clelland. “We said, ‘We’re already a church; we might as well express what we already are.’”

So, under the umbrella of Sanctuary Toronto, Sanctuary London became an official church on January 1, 2011. Sanctuary London offers several weekday drop-ins, meals, art classes, a Bible study, a worship service, and continues to partner with Streetlight. About 30-50 people come regularly, with another 400 to 500 coming occasionally.

Mike, his arms covered with tattoos, often paints canvases with Clelland. But

when they first met, Mike had threatened a volunteer. Yet Mike was drawn to the group, and when they went to the beach, he asked to come along. “When we got there, Mike was just sitting there alone, brooding, so I invited him to throw a Frisbee with me,” says Clelland. And that began a process of building trust. Two years ago, Mike was baptized, and now he often goes with Clelland when he speaks to groups.

When Mike shares his story, people respond. “The poor give us the gift of allowing us to see our own poverty,” says Clelland. “You don’t have to put on a mask and pretend that because of Jesus you have it all together.”

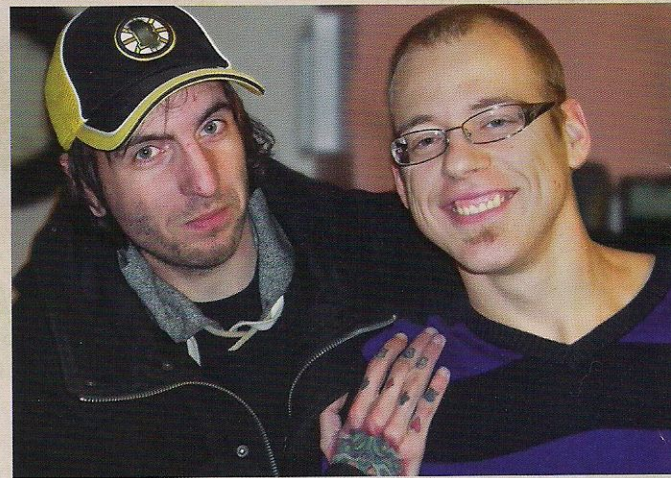
The biggest surprise to Clelland in planting this church has been the support of churches. “When I first started, I felt alone. But now there’s an openness to see that the call of Jesus is not just a personal relationship—as wonderful as that is—but a calling to a different lifestyle, a kingdom in which the most impoverished are

taken care of and where justice is done.”

What would Gil say to a church that wants to get involved with impoverished people in their own community? “Find someone who’s working with them, and join them. Lead with your ears, not your mouth.” ■



In addition to running art classes for people in need, Sanctuary London offers several weekday drop-ins, meals, a Bible study, and a worship service.



“The poor give us the gift of allowing us to see our own poverty,” says Gil Clelland, pastor of Sanctuary London. “You don’t have to put on a mask and pretend that because of Jesus you have it all together.”
Bottom right: Darryl Reckman