

## Pastor Takes Leap of Faith

10:00 PM PST on Monday, February 1, 2010

Cassie MacDuff The Press-Enterprise

When the Rev. David Kalke came to the shuttered Lutheran church in San Bernardino in 1996, he walked where angels fear to tread.

Gunfire, gangs, graffiti and drug dealing were commonplace in the impoverished neighborhood on North G Street.

Teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases were rampant, the infant mortality rate tragic.

The predominantly white congregation steadily dwindled as the area's black and Latino populations grew. Finally, church leaders closed the doors.

But some weren't willing to abandon the community, said Bishop emeritus **Robert Miller**, 76, after Kalke's last service on Sunday.

They decided to turn the building into a mission.

Miller had heard of Kalke, who was pastor in a tough neighborhood in the South Bronx, and brought him to San Bernardino. But he never envisioned the transformation Kalke would achieve with Central City Lutheran Mission.

Kalke turned a falling-apart neighborhood into a community. It was visible on Sunday as parishioners flocked to the Spanish-language service he launched.

The devoted congregation poured out heartfelt thanks and tearful goodbyes.

Kalke's vision went beyond worship. The church became a homeless shelter at night. A community room is used for aerobics classes and literacy training.

With grants Kalke wrote, the mission opened a health care clinic and acquired 11 houses for HIV-positive residents.

The shelters, HIV homes and brightly spray-painted murals on outside walls -- the work of former taggers -- initially met with resistance but are central to the mission's transformative work.

But Kalke has devoted supporters of his approach, including Gwen and Bob Bergh, of Riverside.

Bob Bergh, a retired UCR professor, said Kalke's love for society's most afflicted gives true expression to Christianity. It has turned around the lives of alcoholics, drug addicts and young people heading for trouble.

I met two of those young people at Kalke's farewell.

Radiance Davis, 25, came to the mission at age 16 to do court-ordered community service. Kalke gave her a voice and taught her how to share with others, she said.

"I grew up and I grew up fast," she said. She stayed as a peer counselor and is about to publish a book of poems about the struggles on San Bernardino's Westside.

Carlos Necochea, 28, came to the mission in 1997 for a summer job. Kalke taught him leadership by giving him responsibilities.

"He just gave us the opportunity and we had to run with it," said Necochea, who now sees himself as a leader and a role model.

Kalke's departure puts Central City Lutheran Mission at a crossroads. Will his holistic vision -- weaving worship with social activism -- be sustained? Who will fill his shoes?

"That is of great concern to me," Miller said. "We're all asking that," Bergh said.

But after 13 years, Kalke said it was time for him to let the mission grow on its own.

It's a leap of faith. I hope it's answered affirmatively.

*Cassie MacDuff can be reached at 951-368-9470 or [cmacduff@PE.com](mailto:cmacduff@PE.com)*