

Director of San Bernardino's Central City Lutheran Mission resigns

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By DAVID OLSON
The Press-Enterprise

The Rev. David Kalke, who built Central City Lutheran Mission into one of San Bernardino's leading social-service providers, is leaving the organization to head a new institute in Mexico.

Kalke's last day is Monday. The mission's board has not yet named a replacement. The institute in Mexico will house a library for social-change research and include a Spanish school in which students will learn the social and political reality of Mexico and be offered volunteer opportunities.

Kalke's legacy in San Bernardino includes a health clinic, a community garden, a winter homeless shelter, meal and food-pantry programs, literacy classes, after-school tutoring and youth-culture programs.

Kalke, 61, was the founding executive director of the mission in 1996 and from the beginning took an unconventional approach to his ministry.

The walls on and surrounding the mission, in a struggling neighborhood north of downtown San Bernardino, are covered with colorful murals, many painted by former graffiti taggers. His Evangelical Lutheran Church in America synod -- similar to a diocese -- forbade him in 2004 from leading Lutheran worship services after he hired an openly lesbian pastor against church rules, so he now presides over independently affiliated services six days a week.

Guiding Kalke is his belief in Jesus as an advocate for the poor and oppressed, and an approach that respects each person's way of life.

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Mark Zaleski / The Press-Enterprise

The Rev. David Kalke, 61, took an unconventional approach to his ministry. The walls on and surrounding Central City Lutheran Mission in San Bernardino are covered with colorful murals, many painted by former graffiti taggers.

Rather than trying to force taggers to stop spray-painting, Kalke encourages them to channel their energies toward art. Three books that Central City published feature sometimes-angry poems and essays by area youth about life in poverty and calls to rise up against the establishment.

"Our style of working with youth is not to judge them, not to condemn them, but to accept and meet them where they're at," Kalke said.

Alex Avila, the mission's cultural director, recalled meeting Kalke when he was a 13-year-old skipping school and getting into fights. He was impressed by how Kalke gave youth a voice and respected them for who they were. He saw them turn away from

drugs and violence and learn skills and trades. Avila, 31, said if he hadn't met Kalke, "I know for sure I'd be dead or in jail, and that's not to create a cliché."

Estela Gamboa, 45, was so moved with how Kalke helped her with family problems that she now regularly volunteers with the church.

"They treat each person here as important," Gamboa said. "I've never seen a church where homeless people are treated with such humanity."

The sanctuary of Kalke's church illustrates his approach to ministry. Worshippers pray before a statue of the Catholic Virgin of Guadalupe. On the wall of Kalke's office is a painting a former tagger created that represents the Virgin as a young brown-skinned woman in a blue hoodie.

As a Lutheran, Kalke does not pray to the Virgin of Guadalupe. But he knows how his congregants -- most of whom are poor immigrants from Mexico -- revere her, and how she is a symbol of Mexico and represents God's identification with people of color.

"I can't just go in and say, 'I'm going to ignore this,'" Kalke said. "I'm not going to talk theology in a way they don't understand."

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KALKE FAREWELL

The Rev. David Kalke is leaving Central City Lutheran Mission to head a new institute in Mexico.

What: Kalke's final public appearance in San Bernardino, at the organization's 14th annual **[Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)** celebration.

When: 6 p.m. Monday

Where: Central City Lutheran Mission, 1354 N. G St.

Information: 909-381-6921
