

BUILDING CASA SHALOM

LARRY R. HYGH

Signs of hope are glimmering on what was once an abandoned lot in the Pico Union section of Los Angeles. The Pico Union United Methodist Shalom Ministry, a congregation of 25 persons, is collaborating with other United Methodist and secular entities to bring about economic empowerment and development in their local community.

In late August, Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, resident Bishop of the California-Pacific Conference (Los Angeles area), along with other United Methodist leaders, ecumenical and interfaith leaders, Los Angeles city officials, and community representatives blessed the ground on a vacant city lot for a new development called Casa Shalom.

Casa Shalom, scheduled to be completed in November 2005, will be an affordable housing complex consisting of 30 units with 12 three-bedroom apartments, 18 two-bedroom apartments, 40 parking spaces, and a 40-child day care center to be run by PACE Headstart.

"It grew out of a yearning, a yearning for wholeness, a yearning for Shalom, a yearning for God's blessings," said Bishop Swenson. "The realization of a dream has come true. We dreamed the dream of a community of Shalom in this place."

Developers for the project include the 1010 Development Group, an outgrowth of First United Methodist Church of Los Angeles, and the Decro Development Group. The 1010 Development Group believes that affordable housing should be quality housing accompanied with services that empower its residents. It also believes that neighborhoods should be revitalized with economic development opportunities. With this goal in mind, the development group has worked with congregations and faith-based organizations to develop affordable housing with social services on church-owned land.

Casa Shalom is a \$7.7 million project which has funding from the Los Angeles City Trust Fund, The Multifamily Housing (Proposition 47) from the State of California, The Federal Home Loan Bank, L.A. Arena Company (Staples Center), The US Bank

Foundation, tax exempt bonds from US Bank and tax credits from National Equity Funds.

"The home of the animals and all who have loved and lived in this place long before us will bless it," said Bishop Swenson.

Casa Shalom is being built on land donated by the Los Angeles District of the United Methodist Church. For the past several years, on a portion of the land, the Pico Union Shalom Ministry has been operating a church, community garden, and other community services on the site. During construction of Casa Shalom, the Shalom Ministry will continue to serve the neighborhood through its food distribution program, weekly peace vigils, AIDS outreach ministry, after-school wrestling programs, and housing the Pico Union Neighborhood Council. An office trailer has been set up behind the site to manage the services.

Once Casa Shalom is complete, the community room will serve as Pico Union Shalom Ministry's chapel on Sundays and as needed throughout the week. The congregation had been worshipping in a small house on the lot that has been razed for the project.

The Rev. Jim Conn, Urban Strategist for the California-Pacific Conference says that the United Methodist presence in the neighborhood means there will be an on-going effort to develop leadership from within the community. "Poor and immigrant communities, often overwhelmed by the necessities of mere survival, require conscious effort and consistent work to encourage residents to take leadership over the decisions that affect their lives," said Conn. "This project will enable local people to take charge of their lives and their neighborhood."

The mission of the Pico Union Shalom Ministry is to provide a place of acceptance and security inside the church and its members, in which everyone has the freedom to be, so they can act out God's love in their neighborhood and world, especially focusing on those on the margins of society and those rejected by the church.

The Shalom Ministry consists of immigrants from Mexico and Central American countries and includes gay, lesbian, and trans-

gendered persons. The Rev. Jennifer Gutierrez, pastor of Pico Union Shalom Ministry, notes that the religious backgrounds of the members ranges from Roman Catholic to Seventh Day Adventist. "All services are conducted in Spanish, with English translation provided for those who need it," said Gutierrez. "At Pico Union Shalom Ministry we strive to build God's Kingdom on earth in all of its diversity."

Gutierrez says that the Shalom Ministry's theme scripture is Luke 14:15-24, the parable of the Great Banquet where Jesus says to go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. "We see ourselves as starting the ministry with those people, but also ministering to everyone in the street who wants to come to the banquet," said Gutierrez.

"We're mandated by God to share the word and make disciples of all nations," said Gutierrez. "When you read the stories of Jesus and who he ministered to, it was always people who were in need (lame, blind, etc.) and they were not always accepted by society," she added. "I like to think of our church as that model of ministry who ministers to the least of these."

The Shalom Ministry also has a community organizer in the community to help identify the needs of the community. One outreach in the community has been at Oportunidad. Oportunidad is community-based organization that provides support and health services to street level sex workers in the Pico Union/MacArthur Park section of Los Angeles. It is also a place where the homeless come to receive food. The Shalom Ministry has been doing a Bible Study once a week for about 15 to 20 homeless persons at Oportunidad. Oportunidad has asked that the Shalom Ministry do more than Bible Study and also have a worship service once a week on its site.

The Pico Union Shalom Ministry has received a \$50,000 grant from the California Endowment for an AIDS ministry. The AIDS ministry will provide education and testing as well as counseling for persons living

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The Entire Congregation Itinerates



West Los Angeles United Methodist Church bids "aloha" to the members of Pico Union United Methodist Shalom Ministry on their last day together. Jennifer Gutierrez, pastor of Pico Union, holds her daughter. Next to them is Gail Messner, pastor of West LA UMC.

Over 14 months while the Casa Shalom project is being developed, the entire congregation of Pico Union Shalom Ministry will itinerate, worshipping with other United Methodist congregations in Los Angeles. The West Los Angeles United Methodist Church was the first to invite the Pico Union Shalom Ministry to worship with them. West Los Angeles United Methodist Church is a largely Japanese-American congregation.

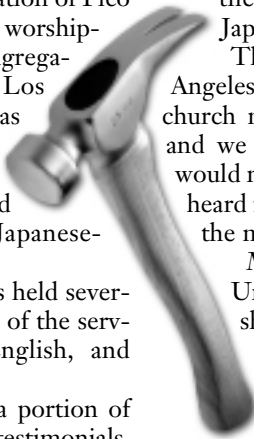
During this time, the congregations held several trilingual worship services. All parts of the service were presented in Japanese, English, and Spanish.

Pico Union Shalom Ministry has a portion of their worship service dedicated to testimonials. They asked the Japanese congregation to share their stories with them. They wanted to learn

about the Hiroshima bombing. It turned out that there was a Hiroshima survivor in the Japanese language congregation.

The Rev. Gail Messner, pastor of West Los Angeles United Methodist Church said, "Our church member gave such a powerful testimony and we would not have heard it if Pico Union would not have asked." The next week the church heard from a member whose father had served in the military at Pearl Harbor.

Messner says that West Los Angeles United Methodist Church has had relationship with Pico Union Shalom Ministry for a number of years supporting their toy drive and jacket and blanket drives. She added, "they come and support our (church) bazaar having a tamale booth among the Japanese food."



with HIV/AIDS. "We will also provide Bible Study and spiritual support for these persons," said Gutierrez.

During the Christmas season, the Shalom Ministry gave away more than 150 toys to needy children in the neighborhood.

Gutierrez wants to challenge the United Methodist Church as a denomination to put more resources towards Hispanic ministries. "It could be a growing edge for the church," she said. "What we're trying to do is put forward a model for doing urban ministry, not a traditional model for Sunday morning ministry," she added. "This means multiple locations and flexibility."

Gutierrez also said, "we need to look for other models besides the big church on Sunday that people drive to."

The mission of the Pico Union Shalom Ministry is to be a church that stands for peace working to build the Kingdom of God where peace, justice, and love reign together. They strive to nurture peace in the hearts of individuals and in their relations with one another while working to promote peace in their home, neighborhood, and world.

The Pico Union Shalom Ministry started

in the 1980s in downtown Los Angeles at First United Methodist Church. It was the church's response to the growing number of new immigrants from Central America. It was formed as a community based ministry originally called Adelante with "base points" in and around the Pico Union section of Los Angeles.

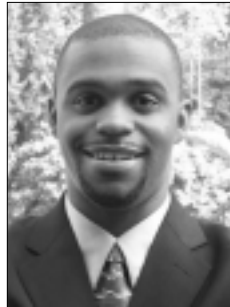
In 1990, the sponsorship for the ministry was taken over by the Hispanic Ministry of Wilshire United Methodist Church and a small facility on the corner of Pico and Vermont streets in the Pico Union section of Los Angeles was purchased where programs of worship, Bible Study, English as a Second Language classes, and food and clothing distribution were developed.

The Pico Union Shalom Ministry was reorganized in the early 1990s and is one of the denomination's original Shalom Zones. It was established in 1992 by the California-Pacific Conference in response to the Los Angeles riots triggered by the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King. It was determined that 22 percent of the businesses destroyed in Los Angeles were Hispanic and

primarily in the Pico Union area. The 1992 General Conference session in Louisville also mandated that a "Shalom Zone" be established in Los Angeles to address the ministry needs of a whole host of peoples who were hurting, suffering, and dying.

Shalom Zones are geographic areas where churches collaborate with community organizations, businesses, institutions, and residents to transform the conditions that affect people's lives to change negative forces within the community into positive actions for shalom (peace). □

Larry R. Hygh, Jr. is the Director of Communications for the denomination's California-Pacific Conference. The conference includes churches in Southern California, Hawaii, Guam, and Saipan. He is also a doctoral student at Pepperdine University in the Organizational Leadership program.



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