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**O**n a bright weekday morning at Templo Calvario church in downtown Santa Ana, a line of people waits to receive food from a large warehouse where pallets of food are stacked high. Fathers hold their daughters' hands, women wait with empty bags and boxes. Pastor Daniel de Leon '67 walks the line and chats easily with them. In the last 28 years he has helped turn a small group of believers into by far the largest Hispanic church in the U.S., and a pioneering congregation which has gained a national reputation, even at the White House, for relentlessly serving others.

"My philosophy of ministry is that the local church is the most important entity in the local community, and that it should live up to the expectation I think God has of the church," de Leon says. "He said if you visit those in hospitals and jails, you're visiting me. If you give a cup of cold water in my name, if you do this to one of these little ones, you're doing it to me. Anything we can do to serve the community with no strings attached, we'll do."

Santa Ana is the largest and poorest city in Orange County, and one of the poorest cities in the U.S. It has the nation's highest high school drop-out rate. It is a major entry point for immigrants from Latin America, and the population here is 75 percent Hispanic.

*Daniel de Leon, continued on page 4*

# Compassion



Templo Calvario sits in the middle, occupying a city block in a neighborhood whose main industry is automobile repair, and where the sound of shop tools and pneumatic drills fills the air. The front of the church looks like a shopping center. The large food warehouses are in the back.

De Leon started Obras de Amor (Works of Love), Templo's food ministry, soon after coming to the church. Obras now serves hundreds of people each week. Gustavo Gonzalez '04, assistant director of Obras, says rents are so high that most residents live 2-3 families per apartment, and many don't have jobs.

Alfonsina, who is waiting in line, is a grandmother from Mexico who has been coming here every week for three years.

"There's a lot of need," she says in Spanish.

"Here I get spiritual nurture, and the food, which I give to my neighbors, too."

With her is Maria who emigrated from Mexico 30 years ago. She has six children.

"Some neighbors told me there was a church that helps the poor, and if you go there they will give you things to help you," she says. "The community needs this help."

They receive groceries ranging from potatoes and onions to upscale offerings like soymilk, fresh bagged salad, specialty breads, cherry tomatoes, Portabella mushrooms and Schwepes bottled water, much of it stored in two freezers the size of a basketball half-court each.

De Leon's passion to serve the needy comes from his father, a businessman who also established seven churches in Texas. De Leon remembers going around asking for donations of broken toys, fruit and candy for poor people during the Christmas season. But there was a time when de Leon's own future seemed clouded. In spite of his church upbringing he strayed into hard drinking and fighting as a teenager.

"I wanted to prove I could conquer the world," he says. "I did all sorts of crazy things."

Finally, a judge asked him to leave the state of Texas within

three days, because he didn't want to send him to prison.

"He said, 'You're going to kill somebody, or somebody is going to kill you before long,'" de Leon recalls.

The troubled youth landed in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where his sister and her husband, an Assemblies of God pastor, lived. Within weeks de Leon made a radical turnaround, committed his life to Christ and soon came to VU to study for the ministry with "no doubt in my mind" about his newfound calling, he says.

He arrived in Santa Ana and lived with his grandmother to save on rent.

"My time at VU was a very positive experience," he says. "I found a lot of support from the administration and teaching staff. I could go to any one of them at any time and ask them questions."

He headed up the Latin American prayer group, sang in the Ambassador Choir and played a part in a campus play. But his most formative experiences took place in his New Testament classes with professors Gordon Fee and Harold Fischer.

"I used to sit there and get everything Dr. Fee had to give in Greek and New Testament classes," he says. "I enjoyed it thoroughly. Dr. Fischer was so spiritual. Sometimes we'd have church in our classes. It was very stimulating and challenging. I feel strongly that I was founded in my

faith in those classes. All the New Testament studies were so good to me."

After getting married and graduating from VU with a bachelor's degree in Bible, he began working for the Santa Ana Unified School district as a teacher, doing ministry on the side. The superintendent wanted him to be principal of a new middle school, but the night before de Leon accepted the job, "the Lord reminded me again in no uncertain terms" of his life calling. During dinner with friends, a visiting evangelist told him, "The Lord says, 'You are not called to do that work. I have

called you to be my servant.'" The words hit de Leon hard. He broke down, took his wife's hand and decided to resign his job the next morning and enter the full-time ministry.

The poverty that followed had spiritual rewards, he says.

"It was incredible, trusting God for every penny that came in,"



De Leon's Obras de Amor (Works of Love) ministry gives away \$10 million a year in food and assistance to the poor in Santa Ana.



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***"We want to bring regeneration to the individual and transformation to the community,"***

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de Leon says. “God put me to the test so I could learn to trust in him. And He miraculously provided, which was wonderful.”

That trust would serve him well later on. After seven years as a regional youth director for a church denomination, and another three years as a horse race track chaplain, de Leon’s former church, Templo Calvario, sent him an S.O.S. They were in crisis, had lost their pastor and couldn’t find a replacement. Church attendance had plummeted from 250 to 60.

Though he had no interest in becoming a pastor, de Leon agreed to preach for them in the interim; but the people insisted he be their pastor. He refused, even as the church tried to vote him in. Finally, he reluctantly agreed, but pledged on his first Sunday that the church would have to grow and move into a much larger building within two years for de Leon to be certain it was God’s will. “If that does not happen,” he told them, “I will leave you, because you and I made a mistake.”

Two years later Templo Calvario was meeting in a large building downtown, with 750 people in attendance. By 1982 they had the fastest growing Sunday school of any church in California.

In 1985 they moved to their present 1,400-seat facility, and Billy Graham preached their dedicatory service. They used two brand new warehouses for food give-aways, and soon bought a third.

“Danny has blazed a trail of evangelism and compassion that many faith-based leaders are following,” says David Donaldson, founder of We Care America, a Washington, D.C.-based organization which advocates for faith-based organizations. “The first time I met Danny, we were talking about the lost and needy in his community, and he broke down and started crying, which I hadn’t seen in many pastors. Some pastors become CEOs, distant from or even calloused toward the poor. But for Danny to weep on behalf of the hurting in his community, even as he has this huge church that’s ministering to thousands of individuals a week — it affected me. He and his brother Lee have had a profound impact on my life.”

Local leaders, too, say de Leon and Templo Calvario are changing things in Santa Ana.

“Pastor de Leon, through his work with Templo Calvario, is a wonderful example of a dynamic religious leader who is improving the quality of life in our community through his outreach services and moral leadership,” says Miguel Pulido, mayor of Santa Ana.

Today, Templo Calvario draws 6,300 in weekend attendance. It is the fastest-growing church-based, faith-based organization in the nation. In August, an assistant to Tommy Thompson,

secretary of health and human services, presented them with a 3-year, half-million-dollar grant to help the children of prisoners.

Few churches in the U.S., let alone Orange County, are doing such large-scale community-service ministry. Amazingly, the church’s efforts are sustained by a congregation which is majority immigrant and almost entirely poor.


“We have nobody in the upper echelon of income,” says de Leon. “Often the poor are not used to giving. They are afraid they won’t get it back. But when they learn to give faithfully, God blesses them. For the poor to help the poor, it’s really something.”

De Leon holds master’s degrees from Chapman University and CSU Fullerton, and an M.Div. from Fuller

Theological Seminary. He has been an associate of the Billy Graham Association, conducting seminars and crusades in Latin America. He is a Promise Keepers board member, and spoke to 32,000 men at Angels Stadium as part of the first Promise Keepers event held outside of Colorado. He was the first and only Spanish host for The 700 Club, producing close to 600 programs in three years. He has visited the White House many times, and the story of Templo Calvario, he is told, sits on the president’s nightstand.

But the best is yet to come, he believes. Templo Calvario’s community development center now offers daycare for 90 kids from the neighborhood, keeping the price low so single mothers can afford it. They help people find career paths. They teach other churches the basics of church administration. They operate three after-school centers and a public charter school which is part of the Santa Ana School District. Through Obras de Amor and an extensive coalition of partner churches they feed more than 900,000 people a year, giving away \$10.6 million worth of food and, to a lesser extent, clothing and household items.

De Leon now wants the church to move into economic development, refurbishing homes and selling them to low-income buyers. He wants to change the larger economic climate of Santa Ana with job and business creation.

“We want to bring regeneration to the individual and transformation to the community,” says de Leon. “We are trying to impact the city as much as we can. Anything we can get involved in, to extend that cup of cold water to the community, we’re going to do it with the help of God.” 



*Gustavo Gonzalez '04, assistant director of Obras, with a pastor of an Indonesian church (above). Dozens of churches partner with Templo Calvario in food distribution. At left, a weekday church service.*