

Kiteley Family a Point of Light in Troubled Oakland

From matriarch Violet, 77, to grandson Patrick, 28, three generations are taking the gospel to the city

Amid political upheaval, racial tension and surging crime in Oakland, Calif., Violet Kiteley, son David, and grandchildren Patrick and Melinda have lived, ministered and thrived, staking a spiritual claim in one of America's toughest cities.

The Kiteleys' unorthodox approach to sharing the gospel not only has touched virtually every corner of the neighborhood where their Shiloh Christian Fellowship is located, but it also has extended to 60 nations.

Violet Kiteley, now 77, was a ministry pioneer long before she arrived in Oakland, which is known for having one of America's most dangerous and poorest inner cities. She was one of the first prominent female preachers of the 20th century and a bellwether of Pentecostal revival in the Latter Rain movement that produced preachers William Branham and Oral Roberts.

She prayed to accept Christ as her Savior at age 6. As a teen she received a prophecy given through Aimee Semple McPherson. "She put her hand on my head and said that the mantle of God was on [me] and I would minister around the world," Kiteley recalled.

During World War II, many male pastors were drafted into military service. To fill the need in the Assemblies of God in her native British Columbia, Kiteley—who had taught Sunday school—became a pulpit preacher.

Ministry for her could have had an early end. On July 13, 1945, her husband of less than a year was killed in an airplane crash. At the time, she was pregnant. David was born in October of that year, but Kiteley remained hospitalized for a time and could not walk for 13 months.

In 1965, Violet and David moved to Oakland to plant a church. In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and in the hometown of the militant Black Panthers, the mother-and-son ministry team started Shiloh as a Bible study in the living room of an African American family—then expanded it into a Bible school. Today the independent Pentecostal church has about 2,000 members, and the school has satellite campuses in six countries.

“Our mission is restoration,” said Violet, who now heads the Bible school. “We want to see racial, economic and gender reconciliation.”

When the Kiteleys learned that a nearby street was a haven for drug trafficking, they instituted block parties and held a health fair. Crime plummeted on that street and others.

In 1988, Shiloh was honored for its role by then-California Gov. George Deukmejian and by the National Crime Prevention Council. Subsequently, Shiloh has partnered with the Oakland Police Department on many projects, including Christmas dinners and fingerprinting children for identification.

David Kiteley, who now serves as senior pastor, leads a mid-week Bible study that is attended by about 75 police officers. In the 1960s, he marched with the Civil Rights protesters, and for most of his ministry years the city has been predominantly

African American.

However, that has started to change. The African American population in Oakland has dipped from 65 percent to 41 percent. New arrivals come from Asia, Latin America and the South Pacific.

“When the demographics change,” David said, “we have to change our ministry. We used to have just Black History Day. Now we have an Asian day and a Hispanic day. Our people have to be culturally aware.”

Today, the church is 35 percent African American, 30 percent Caucasian, 15 percent Hispanic, 10 percent African national, and 10 percent Asian and Pacific Islander.

“It is not enough to just get different races to come to church together on Sunday,” David said. “We are not integrated until we have shared a meal together, been in each other’s homes and heard each other’s stories.”

David’s son Patrick, 28, was raised in this cross-cultural environment. The younger Kiteley leads the Saturday night youth-and-college service at Shiloh and is on course to become senior pastor when his father steps aside.

Patrick Kiteley helps facilitate Bible studies for several hundred students at the University of California at Berkeley and at California State University at Hayward. He also served on the advisory board for The Call DC.

Steven Lawson in Oakland, Calif.