

Grace Still Abounds After 30 Years of Ministry

Rick Del Rio's fervor still rocks for souls in the inner city. And after 30 years of enduring myriad obstacles such as multiple moves, turbulent neighborhood demographics and financial setbacks, his Abounding Grace Ministries (AGM) on Manhattan's Lower East Side is writing a new chapter in outreach.

"I feel like David, whose hands are trained for war," he says. At 60, the unconventional pastor keeps up his streetwise pose—piloting a mean Harley and sporting a gold earring, goatee, black leather vest and tattoos on each arm, which are living sermons proclaiming, "Jesus Christ is Lord" and "The Lion of Judah Has Conquered."

Del Rio intends on spending the next 10 years in the streets doing creative evangelism while mentoring new leaders. "My great passion is to empower the next generation of leadership in our church by providing the resources they need," he says. Del Rio doesn't want them to struggle as he did through some stormy years.

"It cost us everything," the evangelist says. "We have no retirement, no real estate and no security. There is nothing left. But God keeps the books and we continue to serve with a joyful heart."

Countless thousands have been impacted by AGM over the years. Christian F. Monzón is a typical example. After a troubled past in Colorado, he went to New York in 2001. He experienced the love of Christ and His forgiveness through AGM and now serves as communications director and assistant director of adult Christian education. "My wife, Jenny, and I are breaking the generational curses of broken families and absent

fathers," he says.

The ministry's racially mixed turf cuts a wide swath on the socioeconomic scale. High-rise public housing projects tower over swanky multimillion-dollar condos. Welfare recipients, hipsters, seniors, Wall Street executives, artists, musicians, drug addicts, the homeless, gays, 20-something professionals and bikers rub shoulders on the crowded streets. While an estimated 30 percent of the residents have annual incomes below \$19,000, a steady gentrification of the neighborhood has pushed rents into the stratosphere.

Currently AGM meets for worship in Public School 34. The church supported a successful citywide effort reversing the New York Department of Education's ban on church access to school property after hours.

At its recent 30th anniversary banquet, AGM unveiled phase one of a bold plan called "Project Promise Land" to eventually raise \$10 million for a holistic ministry center. The center would include space for worship services, community social ministries, music and arts programs, and leadership development.

AGM is also partnering with Del Rio's son, Jeremy, in his 2020 Vision for Schools organization he co-founded in 2008. "We want to restore public education in New York City," Jeremy stresses. "It's a justice issue. Of the 1.1 million students enrolled, only 21 percent will finish ready for college and careers. They are ill-equipped for life."

Joining with Young Life and other evangelical groups, the younger Del Rio is enlisting churches to adopt individual schools, pray for them and provide after-hours tutoring programs. Surprisingly, schools welcome the help—especially because of diminishing resources for music, art and drama.

"When you come in as Jesus would, as a humble servant, people respond," Jeremy says, noting that the programs open up

conversations about Jesus, which feeds students into church youth groups. "We want to transform public schools within a single generation."

Hurricane Sandy did a terrible number on lower Manhattan, stranding thousands without power and water. Responding quickly to show Christ's love in a practical way, AGM formed teams to distribute food and water. They handed out sandwiches, soup and dry food to 400 people. Says Del Rio, "It's a joy to be where the need is."