

Merci to a Mercy Mission

When Église Nouvelle Vie (New Life Church) opened its doors in 1993 on the south shore of Montreal, 50 saints called the charismatic church home. Today, it's become an army of more than 5,000 service-minded believers making a difference in a nation where less than 20 percent of the population attends a church service on a regular basis.

Église Nouvelle Vie was founded on two basic principles: showing mercy to the needy and pursuing **God's presence**. Claude Houde, pastor of the Canadian church, credits those principles with the church's exponential growth over the past two decades.

"About 80 percent of Église Nouvelle Vie's members are new Christians," says the 49-year-old Houde. "Works of service are the key to evangelism in Quebec because there's so much skepticism toward the traditional church, yet there is a deep **spiritual hunger**."

Houde relates to mercy outreaches because he grew up in a rough home with an alcoholic father. He confessed Christ at 17 thanks to the influence of his mother's Christian friend.

"She really showed the love of Christ to my mother and me," he recalls. "It made me determined to show the love and mercy of Christ above all else when I began to lead a church."

Église Nouvelle Vie displays works of service in a variety of ways. A food bank feeds 10,000 people a month, for example, while a language and life-skills program helps immigrants assimilate into Montreal culture.

The church also offers community classes on budgeting and cooking, as well as a ministry to impoverished pregnant women. That program encourages women to keep their babies in exchange for two years of financial support through generous private-

sector donations.

There's also an outreach to teenage girls involved in prostitution, which launched this past spring. Some of the 12- to 16-year-old girls are pregnant; others dance in strip clubs to supplement their prostitution earnings. The church works with local police and youth services to minister to these girls, who are housed in government-funded youth centers called "*centres de jeunesse*."

"Most of the girls have parents, but their parents don't care," says Église Nouvelle Vie member Pascale Philibert, who is also a social worker in the Montreal suburb of Longueuil. "My church supports teenagers who live in *centres de jeunesse* by giving them clothing and special gifts, especially around Christmas. We want to show the girls that they are important and that someone cares."

Although Église Nouvelle Vie members are not allowed to proselytize or preach to the teenage boys and girls in the *centres de jeunesse*, Philibert says consistently showing them the love of Christ through works of service has caused some to give their hearts to Jesus Christ.

Houde's local church is clearly impacting the community, yet his ministry not only reaches beyond the four walls of his church—it goes beyond the borders of his nation.

In 2007, Église Nouvelle Vie joined with several other French churches to officially launch the French World Christian Association (ACF), a global organization for French-speaking Christians. ACF has more than 30 church plants in Quebec and also works to revitalize existing churches in the area.

"Our vision and our responsibility is to the French world," Houde says. "There are 300 million French-speaking people globally and they are one of the most under-evangelized people groups. Less than 2 percent of French people worldwide are evangelical. In Quebec, it's only 1 percent."